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THE NOVELS OF
FRANK SWINNERTON

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ON THE STAIRCASE
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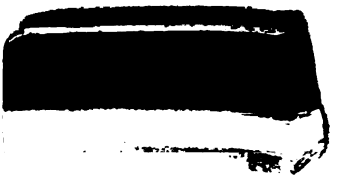

For Grace Eccley
The most careful
wife and daughter
that I know.

Agnes Cody

26th July 1918.

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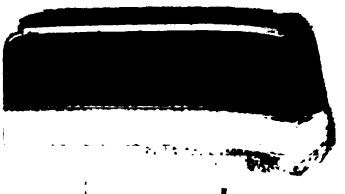

For Grace Ewley
The most careful
wife and dearest
that I know.

Agnes Codey

26th July 1918.

THE CHASTE WIFE

FRANK SWINNERTON

THE CHASTE WIFE

BY

FRANK SWINNERTON

AUTHOR OF "ON THE STAIRCASE,"
"THE HAPPY FAMILY," ETC.

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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TO

MRS. AND P. P.

WITH THE WISH THAT IT
HAD BEEN MORE WORTHY

643

CONTENTS

PART ONE: THE STORY OF THE SCRUPULOUS LOVER

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Crimson Roses	11
II.	What Dorothy Knew	33
III.	Steps Towards Light	52
IV.	Considerations	75
V.	An Unexpected Visitor	89
VI.	Stephen Alone	103
VII.	Ordeals	116
VIII.	Tea with the Moores	134

PART TWO: THE STORY OF THE HUSBAND'S PROGRESS

IX.	The Day of Promise	151
X.	Three Letters	168
XI.	Epitome	179
XII.	Visitors at the Cottage	211
XIII.	Confidences	226
XIV.	Stephen's Narrative	241
XV.	Afterwards	253

PART THREE: THE STORY OF THE CHASTE WIFE

XVI.	Dread	265
XVII.	Directions	277
XVIII.	The Trough of the Wave	290

CHAPTER		PAGE
XIX.	TOLERANCE	302
XX.	ROY IN TROUBLE	313
XXI.	STRAWS	327
XXII.	MINNIE	335
XXIII.	DANGER	343
XXIV.	THE DANGER UNMASKED	354
XXV.	PARENTAL SOLICITUDE	364
XXVI.	HILARY	378
XXVII.	PRISCILLA'S JOURNEY	388
XXVIII.	THE OLD MAN	399
XXIX.	THE LAST	407

PART ONE

THE STORY OF THE SCRUPULOUS LOVER

CHAPTER I: CRIMSON ROSES

i

IT was a very hot day in the middle of summer. The sky was cloudless, and as Priscilla lay in the hammock under a big mulberry-tree she seemed to hear the whole garden droning with the busy song of bees, bumbling as it were with satisfaction at a harvest so happily plentiful. Near to Priscilla were two young men, both of whom were in flannels, as though they either had been playing or were about to play tennis. Two racquets had been tossed aside upon the grass; and a little farther away, through a screen of bushes (favourable cover for the adroitly self-losing tennis balls), could be seen a delectable lawn upon which the single court had been marked out and a net erected. But the two young men made no stir in the direction of their game—the one because he was in love with Priscilla, the other because he was an unusually lazy person—and continued to lounge in the wicker chairs which offered such shady harbourage. All three seemed to be drowsy, lost in the lulling sweetness of the afternoon heat. There were many flowers in the sunny part of the garden: the scent of them was heavy, as thickly mingled as the morning choruses of birds which awakened Priscilla each day. Romeo, a little cat, toyed fancifully with a crawling insect upon a neighbouring path.

Priscilla, in her barely stationary hammock, listened idly to the sounds of the garden. Her brother David watched the thin stream of smoke drift from the bowl of his pipe. Hilary Badoureau, who lay so far back in his chair that his head was little higher than his knees, frowned in a sort of smiling ecstasy. All three were

happy and untroubled, enjoying the day and the hour and the peace of the garden. Only Romeo relaxed none of the intentness of the chase, but pursued his creeping victim with a palatable sense of power felt only by the simple-minded and the unmoral. In some such tranquil hour must the Sleeping Beauty and her retinue have fallen under the spell which had so happy an issue.

In a moment Priscilla's eyes strayed to the path upon which hunting was in progress.

"That horrible Romeo's torturing an insect. Romeo! Leave it alone!"

Romeo's ears acknowledged the call; but his activity did not pause.

Badoureau, who had looked up at Priscilla's speech, smiled at the result.

"Romeo's not like a cat," he remarked idly. "He's more like a friend."

"He's got ears like a horse," Priscilla declared.

"But much larger," added David.

Romeo was obviously discomposed by these remarks; but he struggled to maintain an air of nonchalant disregard. When his effort provoked their laughter, however, he turned and uttered a sharp protest.

"Well, leave the little thing alone," called Priscilla.

Unwillingly, but in a way which suggested that he understood what had been said, Romeo left the path and came across the intervening space, until, making a wide detour in order to avoid the young men, he was able to jump on to the hammock at Priscilla's feet. The hammock rocked gently for an instant under the weight of his onset; and once again there was silence, though a light breeze a little disturbed the leaves of the mulberry-tree; and in every instant tiny speckles of sunlight danced across the shade.

"How old is Romeo?" asked Badoureau at length, because he wanted to hear Priscilla speak.

"Two years. Just two years. And unregenerate. Aren't you, Romeo?" There was no answer. "People talk of animals being so much better than men; but really there doesn't seem much to choose between them, d'you think?"

"That's the Humanitarian paradox," Badoureau agreed. "It pleases them. Nobody else minds."

"Hear, hear!" said David feebly. "O soothsayer."

"What about that game you were going to play?"

"Too hot."

"He knows," David explained, "that he funks my service."

Badoureau slowly pushed himself up in his chair, rose, and seized his racquet. The gibe fell harmlessly aside, for he was obviously a very active young man in perfect condition. He was one of those very fair men who escape light eyelashes; his hair, which was brushed right across his forehead, was yellow, but it was not canary-yellow; and his bright determined face was that of a brave youngster who would be a brave man. He was just under six feet high in height, strikingly beautiful.

"Come along, old thing," he urged.

David also rose, juggling with his pipe, which fell from his teeth as he moved. He was much smaller than his friend, and much darker. His mouth was rather long, but the lips were thin and firmly set. His hair was more curly than Badoureau's, and was brushed straight back over his head. He also was well built; but he was slimmer, and more wiry, a fact which he elaborately strove to hide under an incomparable air of laziness. With his legs apart he picked up the racquet.

Priscilla watched them as they went off to the tennis-lawn, and smiled to see their languor gradually replaced by a subtle air of energy.

"Well, Romeo," she said, "it's evident that you and I are very lazy people."

Romeo pretended not to hear. Only the uncontrollable movement of his large ears betrayed him. He was curled up on a cushion at Priscilla's feet, with his head on her muslin dress, and a smile seemed to curve his lips. Romeo was a tabby cat, deeply coloured in rich browns, with large luminous eyes and the thin face of the female. His underparts were of a delicate fawn, and his feet were white. He would not have taken a prize anywhere, though he might have interested the scientist by reason of his advanced intelligence and strongly marked character. Romeo, in fact, was an instance of the modern sexless cat; for while he was in reality a female he still pursued his course "in maiden meditation, fancy free," and was a bold hunter, an outdoor cat, a home-at-night cat, a friendly little cat, passionately loving Priscilla, obedient as a dog to her whistle, and her constant companion in the garden. His perception of friendliness in men and women, though, of course, influenced by the quietness of each person's movements, was acute. He was very powerful in the Evandine family, and a good friend to have at court, since his approval was admitted to carry much weight.

"Romeo," said Priscilla, "you're getting very rude. I spoke to you."

Romeo made a hoarse noise, as of apology. Satisfied, although rather unwillingly, with this sign of repentance, Priscilla began to remember the first time she had seen Badoureau—when she had gone up to Oxford for one of the celebrations—and she recalled that he had been with David at the station to meet them. There had been a good deal of nonsense, and, upon his part, a little rather undergraduatish pressing sentimentality; and the celebration had been very delightful in all its elaborate, seemingly casual, details. Later, when the young men lived out of college, he and David had shared rooms in King Edward Street, and Badoureau had come home with David one

summer for a few days before they went abroad together. Both had taken History—Badoureau with much éclat—and both had come down from the University about three years before this story opens. David, following that *ignis fatuus* which leads astray so many Oxford and Cambridge men, had, by his father's influence, entered the publishing trade; Badoureau, with rather more money, but less immediate ambition, had subsided in his father's office, had gone so far as to "eat his dinners," and would go, in the legal profession, no farther. His destiny was otherwise.

ii

It is not for one moment to be supposed that Priscilla did not know all that was in Hilary Badoureau's mind concerning herself: his earliest rather pressing sentimental activities had been too unmistakable for that. Moreover, although the manner of his approach to her had improved steadily as he grew older, he still regarded her obviously in a rather possessive way which might well have led a girl of smaller personality to turn instinctively towards him. Badoureau sometimes questioned David as to Priscilla's feelings—such exchanges of opinion were passing, half-breathed, something merely to be mentioned at night while a pipe was being lighted, a conference to be smothered by a slight scorch from a waning match—but Priscilla's feelings remained, to the young men, as mystifying as ever. Until one or other, with all the profound penetration of young manhood, should discover a motion of partiality, Badoureau would not venture to hazard everything by the only method which would have resolved his hesitations. His opportunities were so few, his pride so very powerful—and David's attitude was so mixed between sympathetic ridicule, inability to see any issue excepting his friend's success, and deep scepticism about the whole business—

that Badoureau's doubts were always blowing like sudden winds upon his pride and his desire, making them both flame into an intolerable heat from which he could never escape. He used to sit in his room at home and write little verses to Priscilla, staring at an æsthetic wall-paper for inspiration, and at his prints of Botticelli's works, and at his books. Then he would leave off writing the verses and would rid himself of the poetic impulse by some more active physical exercise. Then he would meet other nice girls, and would mentally compare them with Priscilla. He lived a very happy, healthy life, working as it suited him, playing a great deal, worrying very little indeed, and enjoying a considerable variety in his days, which never, even when love was uppermost in his thoughts, became in the least tedious.

David Evandine, on the other hand, being bent upon quite other schemes, went every day to his publishing office—sometimes read a manuscript, generally lounged about, smoking, and in his lazy way kept most alertly aware of all that was passing, both in the business of which he was a part and in the businesses of all rival firms whatsoever. In three years, owing to his casual partnership, his large circle of acquaintances—which he had made through his father, through his fellow University men, and through his own researches in æsthetic society,—and his natural talent, David had reached a point of omniscience which was the marvel of his associates. He would one day write a very brilliant, casual novel, and put into it the results of his unhesitating observation. David's sharp eye riddled the pretensions of all writers. He knew what each man was good for, and what or whom each woman was bad for. All that extraordinary experience of the undergraduate in exploiting the nonsense and the vanities of this world for the delight of his friends had served as an excellent basis for his later work. It had given him what is called a

catholic taste—which, being defined, signifies a cool narrowness of sympathy, supplemented by ingenious prejudices and a very happy knack of turning to ridicule whatever he did not happen to like. He was a very able, likeable, popular young man, quite modest, but very shrewd, and very typical of his kind and of his class. He was much more susceptible to experience than was Badoureau, and so he assimilated more. It gave him the air of being a man of the world, which is an air greatly cultivated by the undergraduate; but he was almost wholly free of the man-of-the-world's sentimentality. That is to say, he was a gentleman.

So it was that the two friends, sharing so much, found in each other the necessary strangeness and variety that keeps friendship alive. They argued together, lunched together, walked together, played together. Together they sampled the vintages of life, of which it seems to be the business of every educated young man to be a connoisseur. Together they spent hours and evenings of unstinted leisure, and talked as largely, as freely, and as finally as ever they had done in King Edward Street or elsewhere. In spite, however, of so much companionship, the two young men could still beat each other at tennis upon a very hot summer day at the bidding of some vital energy which it had never entered their heads to define. And Priscilla listened to them as they ran about and praised and taunted each other and called their score, until at last the magic word "Game!" sounded in David's exulting voice, followed by his little quick laugh of triumph. At that moment she saw, advancing across the lawn, carrying a little table, Biddy, the prepossessing parlourmaid of the Evandines' household—a girl of perfect manners and, as far as could be ascertained, no personality whatever—competent, silent, inexhaustible, but apparently senseless.

Biddy was not one of those Biddies who say, "Ef ye

plaze, miss." On the contrary, she spoke almost more correctly than did Priscilla herself. She carried the table with remarkable ease and simply astonishing grace, and was able to smile friendly at Priscilla as she put it down. Then she went away again, to return with a huge cakestand; then again, to return with the tray. Only when this was done did she address Priscilla.

"The mistress says that she'll be coming with the American gentleman in a few minutes, Miss Priscilla; and will you please not wait for her."

"Thank you, Biddy. Come along, David. Hilary!"

Priscilla eluded Romeo, and without help disentangled herself from the hammock. The tennis-players came droopingly back into the welcome shadow, pretending to be hotter and more tired than they were. And Priscilla demurely poured out the tea for them, to Badoureau's great admiration.

"Mother will be here in a minute with Mr. Vanamure," she presently announced. "An American who's come to see father," she added for Badoureau's information.

"Oh, *that* chap!" David frowned a little. "Marvellous how he gets about."

"He admires father, it seems." Priscilla spoke quite seriously. She, too, admired Mr. Evandine, and even sometimes read some chapters of his books. She always handled the books with pride, but they were on subjects which did not greatly interest her, so she generally postponed reading them until a more convenient season.

"I saw Agg lunching him the other day. Vanamure's very short, and Agg's as long as a clothes-prop. They looked awfully queer."

"I like Mr. Agg: he's so quaint," Priscilla said. "He goggles at you."

"Oh—Agg. Yes, I know him." Badoureau recalled

a very lengthy man in a strange cloth hat and baggy trousers. "He's a writer or something. Who is Vanamure?"

"American critic. Dull little fellow. I should think he admired everybody. 'Why, this is a more excellent song than the other.' Not a bit like an American either, though he's got a very strong accent. He smokes jolly good cigars."

"D'you mean he's a writer?" Badoureau asked.

"Well, now you come to mention it—I don't believe he is. I fancy he's a man of means who's simply got books on the brain."

"That's just like father!" interrupted Priscilla. "Only, of course, he *is* a writer."

David handed her his cup. It was a disconcerting movement, which Priscilla did not understand. But she obediently refilled the cup, which was as fine and as clear as her own complexion.

"By the way: hasn't your father just published a book?" Badoureau asked.

"A tremendous great book." Priscilla's voice expressed hugeness.

"Your people do it?" said Badoureau to David. David shook his head.

"No: Seeds did it. They do all his books, you know."

"It's an enormous life of Leigh Hunt. He says it fills a great void," explained Priscilla. "You and I mightn't know that, Hilary. Don't you think it sounds rather thrilling?"

"Vastly thrilling," said David dryly. "And what's more, there is now indoors a very vigorous slating of it, calculated to cheer the old man up."

"A slating!" Priscilla's colour rose. "How disgusting! By somebody jealous, I expect. Why, father knows such an awful lot about Leigh Hunt."

"But your father . . ." Badoureau was beginning, when they saw Mrs. Evandine coming across the lawn with a small dark-bearded man, and the arrival of the new-comers put a stop to any further talk on this unpleasant subject.

iii

Mrs. Evandine had passed from youth to middle age so gently that her friends had never noticed the change. It was a shock to them to see that Priscilla was growing up, for, of course, if Priscilla grew up, her mother's age must increase proportionately. That was a conclusion which even they could not shirk. In consternation they would glance at Mrs. Evandine; and in that case they would be reassured. She had grown older so gradually that while she was clearly Priscilla's mother, and not her sister (a relation which could only have been established by some underhand manipulations), she was still beautiful and still without rival. Mrs. Evandine's life had been so entirely happy that her hair retained its colour and her eyes their fresh clearness: yet her nature had such youth and elasticity that she had grown more mature and more wise with the passage of time, without sacrificing a particle of her old charm. She could laugh as naturally as she had ever done; and she had found in her interest and sympathy with others a spiritual reality denied to those women who vainly seek to evoke from their daily self-consciousness a personality wherewith to affright the world. And it is worth noting that even among such women, many of whom she frequently met, Mrs. Evandine was liked and respected. Perhaps it was because she suffered fools gladly; perhaps the fools were less foolish in her company. For it is too seldom realized that sympathy, as well as love, does not simply imagine or bestow beauty: it also calls it forth. As the girl in love seems to grow more beautiful, so she really

grows; and as one kindly treated seems to soften, so she does actually lose her difficult angularities. There is no illusion. Mrs. Evandine saw good; but there was good for her to see. Nevertheless, she was very patient and often rather long-sighted.

Mrs. Evandine saw good in Mr. Vanamure. Mr. Vanamure thought her a most attractive woman. He wished that he could have been snapshotted as he walked across the lawn in her company. It would have made a very charming little picture in a semi-literary periodical—Mr. Vanamure walking with the wife of the eminent critic in the grounds of Mr. Evandine's old-world house at Whetstone. Mr. Vanamure was by no means a typical American; but he had that pictorial sense which many Englishmen suppose to be typically American. He saw himself in charming little pictures, against lovely old porches, and with distinguished men and attractive women, and in the act of mounting a Rolls-Royce motor, and on the side of Snowdon, and gazing at the lions in Trafalgar Square. It was all his modesty. There existed no snapshot of Mr. Vanamure *solus,* Mr. Vanamure in his own home. Always Mr. Vanamure ventured to emulate the chameleon, and take the colour of his surroundings. Not Mr. Vanamure the man was here represented, but Mr. Vanamure the privileged atom. Mr. Vanamure's idea of Paradise must have been a kaleidoscopic view of his encounters with the many celebrated people and places who and which had adorned his snapshots. His manner was placid and benign; his heavy, dark, silken beard and his very luminous eyes were alike ingratiating. He looked upon the trio of young people with an air of suave wonder. They almost expected that he would extol them. To Priscilla, in one quick glance, it seemed as though he might be Romeo's brother.

"How d'you do. Charmed," said Mr. Vanamure bravely. "Delightfully hot." He stopped before them

with a bow of extreme grace, and in his manner a soft inquiring intelligence that was not quite a smile.

"You boys seem to be quite exhausted," Mrs. Evandine went on. "But then I suppose you've been playing." They admitted the fact, to Mr. Vanamure's great interest.

"Now, that's just wonderful!" he declared. "To think that while I was cloistered in Professor Evandine's study, among all those grand old books, there should have been . . . really, you see, the silence of it all. . . . Quite marvellous."

"But when you were very young, Mr. Vanamure—" Priscilla began.

"Never, I assure you, Miss Evandine. Studious from the very first, I must always be with my book in the shadow." Mr. Vanamure sighed, and his mild, sweet, drawling voice seemed a part of the drowsy afternoon. "Beauty transfigured in fine literature was always my delight. . . ."

"Not even sermons in stones?" asked David, smiling. "Did you never conjure the running brook?"

"Never, Mr. Evandine. I'm sorry for it now. I'm conscious as I sit here of the vast enveloping of nature, the enchanting day, and the lovely oneness of the . . . the . . . in fact, of every sound that the breeze carries. But it is always the poet's nature I see, Mr. Evandine, the music of the measured rhythm of life, as one may say. Deepening, as it were. . . ." His voice disappeared, melting into the shadow and the little freckles of sunlight that glanced through the hardly moving spaces of the tree above. Badoureau turned to Priscilla with an air of partial bewilderment that did not wholly conceal contempt.

"On Sunday," he said abruptly. "If I motor over . . . I've got a jolly new car . . ."

"What colour?" asked Priscilla, eager at once to hear such a detail.

"It's the fashionable colour. . . . I forget what it's called. . . . Sort of buff-grey. David's coming with me. I thought if you . . ."

"The lovely softness, you see, of these velvety downs of yours. . . ."

Priscilla could not help listening to that floating voice, those lingering mellifluous accents, and looking from Mr. Vanamure's gentle ingratiating eyes to the quiet sympathy of her mother's expression, and the curious whimsical contraction of David's brow. To return to Badoureau's rather imperative, rather intense contemplation of herself was to experience a sudden shock. It so markedly divided the scene into two parts—into the peaceable and the vigorous. Not for many months had Hilary Badoureau so clearly adopted the attitude of siege. For a fleeting instant Priscilla involunaritly hesitated.

"No, I can't, Hilary. Sorry. Ethel Clodd is coming. Do you know her?"

He was wounded by her refusal, even though it was gently given.

"She could come," he urged. "She could come as well. Why not?"

"I rather seem to fancy she's nervous at high speed."

"There'd be no danger." He was frowning impatiently, with, perhaps, the privilege of an old friend.

"I'm sure of that. But would she know? You see, Hilary, I shouldn't like to promise for her. She's coming to luncheon, and I rather hoped you'd be here to play tennis."

"With Ethel Clodd?" Hilary was momentarily chagrined into exclamation.

"Only the purest expression of the most memorable emotions in the entire gamut," Mr. Vanamure was with some pertinacity pleading in reply to a word of David's. "The loveliest things in all our lovely literature. As one

might more finally and distillingly put it . . . the very *crème de la crème* of the best. . . ."

"Couldn't you?"

"Does she play better than Martin Clodd? He's a positive agony to play against."

"Poor Martin. Yet he's very decent."

"But at what a cost!" chimed in David, who had forsaken Mr. Vanamure's lethargic monologue and left him to engage Mrs. Evandine's inexhaustible attentiveness. "Decency that's the last rag. Decency that's grown on him as a vice until the poor old thing's a shambling wreck of manhood."

"Oh, come!" cried Priscilla.

"I assure you he's . . ."

"But if I *bring the car?*" said Badoureau. "I want you to try her." He looked very insistently at Priscilla as he spoke.

"You can come in the car, Hilary, certainly," she said. "I only meant that I couldn't promise that she'd go." Then, mischievously, she added: "Not even to satisfy you."

The slow red came into Badoureau's cheeks. His lips tightened. He was defiantly resolved.

"I'll persuade her," he said grimly.

Priscilla smiled, and he drew a sharp breath at the sight of her pretty smiling mouth.

iv

When tea was finished Mrs. Evandine and Priscilla walked together to the house, with Romeo following in attendance, his tail rolling in the air. They crossed the sunny lawn before the house, and went into the square, carpeted hall. At the foot of the stairs they paused.

"Will Hilary be staying to dinner?" Mrs. Evandine asked, as she prepared to ascend. "I forgot to ask him."

"No, mother. He's going soon. Will Mr. Vanamure?"

"Your father asked him to stay."

"He's rather too ecstatic, isn't he? I mean, for comfort." Their eyes met, with equal candour.

"I think he's quite sincere."

Priscilla laughed slightly, and dropped her glance.

"I'm afraid Hilary affected me," she said. "He seems incapable of hiding his boredom."

"That's only to say that he still has something to learn, even in charity." Mrs. Evandine had almost said "courtesy."

"Still, it's rather human . . . don't you think?"

Mrs. Evandine was going up the stairs now, and so she did not answer. It may have been that she did not hear. Priscilla turned away, to go into the drawing-room that opened upon the garden, from which she could see the group they had left under the mulberry-tree. Biddy was crossing the lawn with the cake-stand—a trim, demure figure. Mr. Vanamure was following Biddy with his eyes, and Priscilla thought he must be locating her in his kaleidoscopic Paradise. Without any intention of watching, Priscilla stood for a moment at the open window, noticing Hilary Badoureau's rather disdainful attitude as he listened to Mr. Vanamure's conversation. There was a slightly puzzled expression on Priscilla's face. Did her mother not like Hilary? Did she herself understand her mother's feeling about Hilary's manner? And then, still more puzzling, it would seem, did her mother really understand things that Priscilla did not dream of? Was her mother a mystery? Priscilla almost sighed at the thought. It seemed so to fit in with the soft lulling heat of that summer day. . . . Such pleasant wonderings, to which there was no apparent end, in which, whatever happened, there was no urgency, were all a part of the gracious life in this old charming house

—so near to life, so near to nature, yet so far from both. Surely Priscilla was dreaming. . . .

She turned idly away to the piano, upon which stood a bowl of crimson roses, and at the sight of them her face changed. For an instant her lids drooped, and her lips were compressed, as though the roses held some ancient unforgettable memory. When she smiled again Priscilla's smile was graver, more womanly. In the garden, with her lovely, delicate fairness, and in her very soft muslin gown, she had seemed to be both young and immature. Her deep blue eyes, so naturally wide open beneath their white lids, had held no pain or reflectiveness, but only the pure honesty of her nature. Withdrawn now completely from the others, she became subtly different—not more secret, in no way less entirely candid, but certainly more beautiful. She became less the fairy princess, less the unawakened beauty of the sleeping wood, and more clearly an English girl, who was daughter and sister, and would eventually be wife and mother. If before, in the garden, she had been pretty, happy, graceful, and in every respect attractive to the eye, Priscilla now became attractive to the imagination, which alone could perceive behind her normal demeanour the character which actually gave significance to her every feature. When her expression changed, her blue eyes grew darker. Pain, then, was not unknown to her. It would have been impossible to avoid wondering whether the two omniscient young men in the garden, listening with condescension to the naïve raptures of a middle-aged idealist, had altogether reached an understanding of Priscilla's temperament—whether, in concentrating upon a single issue, and in regarding her as related to life solely by this one issue, they had not been guilty of an over-simplification. If the young are always too clever to know anything, might it not be said that in estimating the chances of Priscilla's choice of alternatives they had forgotten all

about the creative as opposed to the passive or receptive side of Priscilla's character? That will be seen hereafter, when those consequences which are neither rewards nor punishments in due course shall have matured.

V

Dinner was served while the daylight lingered, and the long windows of the dining-room still admitted during the meal the evening songs of birds and the translucent greys of the declining day. At the dinner-table were four of those whom we have already met—Priscilla, her mother, David, Mr. Vanamure—and, in addition, Mr. Evandine, a moustached man of middle age, with rather bristling eyebrows and deep-set eyes. Spectacles, the glasses of which were almost circular in shape, and without rims, gave Mr. Evandine a benign, learned look (for he was an exceedingly amiable man); while his rather thin, seedy voice emphasized a slight fastidious mannerism of speech which was not without its impressive effect. He was dressed in the manner described by some writers as "faultlessly," which means that the excellent cut of his dinner-jacket was ably supported by a person well covered with flesh. He was not very tall, but he was very well made, and had always taken such good care of his body, as well as of his tailors, that he looked as though he were in the habit of wearing a dinner-jacket. That is a state to which few spare men and no ill-made men can ever attain. His eyes were blue, and had perhaps once been as blue as Priscilla's; but they were now a little dulled, and the whites were faded. In spite of that, however, his sight could at times be very swift, and slight acquaintances were never sure whether his amiability was normal or a covering for the domestic temper of a scold. That was because his fastidious mannerism sometimes became fastidious irascibility. At the head

of the table he was always courteous; but at all times his conversation was rather too inclined to be bookish, and that made him something less than the perfect host.

Priscilla had changed into a dress of very pale blue, and the effect of the low-necked bodice was to show how exquisitely her slender neck rose, and how delicately poised was her small head. Also, the effect was to make her look like a little girl, for her complexion was so unspoiled, and her expression so unaffected, that one could only think of her as in her teens. In fact, she was exactly twenty-two years and a few days old.

Mr. Vanamure, sitting beside her, and upon Mrs. Evandine's right hand, was in a state of incommunicable pleasure. His sense of Mr. Evandine's profound wisdom, benevolence, and hospitality was acute. His sense of David's amazingly English air of good breeding was one of silent admiration. His sense of the beauty of Mrs. Evandine and Priscilla, linked also with the clear, opalescent lustre of the evening, was almost rapturous. His sensitiveness to beauty was, as Mrs. Evandine had seen, quite genuine; but the guiding taste was uncertain, too eager, and apt to lead him from enthusiasm to enthusiasm from sheer nervousness and dread of the awkwardness of debate. Thus it was that he too assiduously hung upon Mr. Evandine's dropped wisdoms, and thus it was that he came rather to distress David. David, drawling rather lazily, at last put a question.

"But, Mr. Vanamure," he said, "surely you'd admit that most poets write a great deal of bosh—at times when they're below their best? Wordsworth, of course, is the general example."

"Indeed, yes, Mr. Evandine," admitted Mr. Vanamure, making many slow nods, with his eyes opened to their widest to show his great innocence and willingness to agree. "There is no doubt that some of our very greatest

writers have their lapses. You agree?" he asked of Mr. Evandine, smiling gently, as if gratified, at the host's bland consent. "But are not such men, even . . . even, one might say, at their least happy . . . happy, are not they far beyond the common mind of man? Far beyond the reach . . . I beg your pardon." His nervous intentness upon his own desire to please grew more pronounced.

"I understood you to deprecate all adverse criticism of eminent men as impertinence," said David. "All I suggested was that if some of what they have written is *not* good, somebody ought to say so. It ought to be the aim of criticism to distinguish finally between good and less good, less good and mediocre, and mediocre and bad. . . . Only so, it seems to me, can criticism have any reason to be considered an art or a science."

"Quite so. . . . Between good and less good—I agree," pleaded Mr. Vanamure. "The rest—I venture to think . . . And here"—he glanced deprecatingly sideways at Mr. Evandine—"the Professor I trust will agree with me . . . the rest I venture to think—no! It is enough to worship the best. Let us not pursue the lesser goods until we *criticize*"—this word he pronounced with loathing—"criticize them out of their obscurity into a prominence that is undue and undesirable, and arises simply from the desire of the critic to destroy, to depreciate. . . ." Trembling, he discontinued his remarks, and took hock. "Excuse me," he breathlessly added. "Those of us who derive our daily life of the spirit from all that is lovely in literature can't bear to have our Muse treated as if it were a quadruped."

"I'm afraid I'm all for severe scrutiny," said David. "Even of gift-horses."

"You're young, sir . . . you're young. It's natural, Mr. Evandine. But as one grows older one sees the vast illimitable spaces covered by the glorious minds of our greatest poets. . . . One perceives the futility of finger-

ing their lesser works. . . . One even comes to feel that perhaps there's less difference than we had thought between great and small and good and less good. One becomes almost awed before the poet's mind, the creative gift. Afraid to say a word. One realizes, if I might say so, that it may be one's own judgment, one's own failure to understand, that was at fault. . . . What is wanted to stimulate the love of the beautiful is Praise, a Thanksgiving, not Depreciation, not Criticism. Let us have Appreciation."

David was smiling, not at all ruffled, because he was not talking very seriously.

"Now the case comes up rather interestingly," he said. "You may have seen my father's book on Leigh Hunt—excuse me, father. . . . My father, I know, has no objection to my saying this. . . . In that book my father cannot bear to say that Leigh Hunt was a silly, amateurish writer who did a great many things very badly. He cannot bear to say that; but he knows he can make Hunt a most interesting personality whether he says it or not. Don't you think that in omitting to say true words of Hunt's writing, in concentrating only on Hunt's charming essays, and happy thoughts as a commentator, my father is failing in his duty as a critic?"

Mr. Evandine permitted such comments in his hearing from David: he was a very wise man.

"My dear Mr. David Evandine . . ." began Mr. Vanamure.

"Excuse me, Mr. Vanamure. Before you demolish my son, let me do it for you," said Mr. Evandine with an air of smiling gravity that made him very attractive. "What he says has no value at all, because he has taken it all from that review which you so frankly refused to read this afternoon. . . ."

"The abominable slating?" asked Priscilla with eager interest.

"Exactly. A very able, cool, and most interesting article in *The Norm.* I disagree with it entirely. I think it altogether too exacting in its standards—in fact, impossible when one considers the fact that there is room in all human affairs for judgments almost too numerous. . . ."

"Hear, hear," said David mildly.

"But," proceeded Mr. Evandine, "the review, the opinions from which David has impudently adopted, does put the book, and Leigh Hunt, and all the rest of it, in a very candid new light which is most interesting. One doesn't do that sort of thing oneself; nor does one wholly approve it; but one tolerates it for its insight."

"You should welcome it . . . help it," said David. "If criticism is ever to be of any use at all as a purge."

"Pardon . . . it can only," said Mr. Vanamure, "can only give hurt . . . a superfluous act. . . . We can do our best only to bring beauty, gentleness. . . ."

"When we feel passionately for beauty or truth we surely must sometimes hurt," suggested Mrs. Evandine, speaking for the first time. "It doesn't do to be too conventional, do you think?"

Mr. Vanamure was destroyed. He became incoherent in an attempt to agree with everything.

"And this abominable slating," demanded Priscilla. "Does one know who wrote it?"

"Little lamb," remarked David.

"And has mother read it?" asked Priscilla, almost with a sort of indignation.

"Your mother has read it," Mr. Evandine said. "And I'm sorry to say she agrees with it."

"Mother! And who wrote it?"

"Curiously enough . . . an old friend of yours, Priscilla. It's by that young fellow who used to come. . . . Dear me: what *is* his name?

"It's written by Moore . . ." said David.

"Stephen!" Priscilla did not know that she had spoken.

Her mother, closely observing, saw Priscilla's hand move suddenly upon the table, saw Priscilla's head bent as though she had become suddenly short-sighted.

"Of course . . . Stephen Moore. By the way, why does he never come to see us in these times?" asked Mr. Evandine. "It must be years since we saw him."

"I've met him once or twice," David said.

"You've never said—" cried Priscilla swiftly.

"I don't think I ever met him here. I'm not sure I knew that you knew him. Must have been when I was at Oxford."

"In point of fact," Mr. Evandine was explaining to his guest, "the writer of that is a sort of relative of mine—far off—a very clever fellow, who I'm afraid has had a rather hard struggle. I met him once in this district, and we knew him for a time; but I'm afraid he's rather lost sight of us."

"He must be entirely without gratitude; kindness is ill-repaid . . ." said Mr. Vanamure, greatly moved.

"Oh no!" Mr. Evandine assured him. "My impression is quite otherwise."

Mrs. Evandine heard nothing more. She could not help letting her shrewd, clear, mother eye fall upon Priscilla; and Priscilla, screened by flowers from her father, seemed to allow her thoughts to continue. Her face was quite changed, as if it had been reawakened. But presently, as though she had not been breathing, she sighed, her eyes almost closing; and a slow faint colour came into her cheeks, increasing until it spread to her temples. As if doubtfully she raised her head and looked at her mother, immediately again averting her glance.

With the slightest emphasis upon her consciousness Mrs. Evandine pressed home, as it were, the significance of that glance. She, too, sighed.

CHAPTER II: WHAT DOROTHY KNEW

i

FROM the days when Upper Street, Islington, was a prosperous shopping centre, a long range of handsomely decorated and window-dressed drapers and clothiers, to these present days when most of the shops show dusty, drawn blinds, and the stagnating bills of estate agents, is no far cry. The increase in cheap conveyance direct to the great shops of the West End of London, and the huger, more varied selections of stock offered by these great shops, have combined to draw off many old-time purchasers of goods in Islington. More still have passed with the general emigration to the country or the farther suburbs of well-to-do Londoners, at one time resident in the large houses of Islington and Highbury and Barnsbury. All that remains, apart from a few old-established firms with familiar names, is this long row of empty shops, studded here and there with glittering kinema halls and picture palaces, all the more gloomy because of the bright portals of the palaces, and given over to a nightly promenade of the young girls and the young men of the decayed district. So Upper Street and its melancholy neighbours all round, from miserable Pentonville and grimy City Road (where that "Eagle" lived that led roisterers to sing "Pop goes the Weasel") to wretched Liverpool and Essex Roads, present to the eye a depressing picture of shabby life hard to be tolerated by the eager spirit. To have been born in a street off the Upper Street, to have lived there for a short lifetime, to be held in that neighbourhood by the dominating inclination of others—that was the lot of Stephen Moore.

The house in which the Moores lived, of which they

occupied the two upper floors out of five floors (including the basement) was one exactly like its hundred or two hundred fellows. It had a number—52—upon the front door, but, as Dorothy said, that was only to prevent the postman from calling. The house was very solidly built of ugly dun-coloured brick, the rooms were large, and the lower ones were fitted with old-fashioned hanging chandeliers of an imposing character, and with huge mantelpieces that dwarfed any but the most substantial furniture. Higher up, at the very top of the house, the tale was different; but even here the three bedrooms were larger than the bedrooms allotted to those who live in the modern Queen Anne villa. In these three bedrooms slept the Moores, and in the two big rooms below they lived together. John Moore, Stephen Moore, Roy Moore, and Dorothy Moore. John Moore, aged 56; Stephen Moore, aged 28; Dorothy Moore, aged 21; Roy Moore, aged 16. There had been others very long ago; but none had survived; and now Stephen was bread-winner for all of them. It is true that Roy had begun to earn money, that he was self-supporting. It is true that John occasionally spoke of work which was engaging his attention. But it was also true that Dorothy was not allowed to earn money, and it is quite certain that Stephen carried the household precariously—if one may use a homely figure that suggests the tale of Sinbad the Sailor—upon his back. Only Dorothy knew that, through her conscience. She had sometimes wondered why Stephen did not forsake them, and had even asked Stephen this question in so many words. He had grumpily told her that it was no business of hers, that even if he could bring himself to do such a thing, the old man would track him down. . . . That was undeniable. She could see the old man doing it. The old man, she knew, was such a marvellous actor, such an infernal liar. He would go round spinning pathetic yarns about his defaulting son, he would

destroy Stephen's good name, and he would in the end discover where Stephen was, and once more, like the grim wolf of inescapable poverty, establish there his comfortable quarters. So Stephen continued to support the Moores. Dorothy wondered what would be the end of his patience—if, for instance, he would have supported half a dozen of them. She never dared to ask him. She only knew that the old man was sure somehow to be supported by somebody. She guessed that, failing Stephen, it might have been by herself. The old man had no false pride, Dorothy realized.

ii

It was evening, and Dorothy was alone. In the street the sun still sent its hot final light against the upper windows of the houses opposite, which looked as if some dreary person's dream of endless 52's was being developed into a nightmare through the use of a distorting mirror. Dorothy had laid a meal, a light meal of potted meat and salad, and a jugful of water, and some cheese and a home-made cake, upon the dining-room table. She was waiting for Stephen to come home and join her. Roy would not be here for another two hours, the old man might come in at any time, and Stephen could not work at night upon a heavy meal. Dorothy sat by the open window with her hands crossed in her lap, and once lifted them to look at the lines on their palms and their already work-worn fingers.

"Yes," she said aloud. "It's all very well to look at them. Little beast."

She forced her eyes away, to a contemplation of the brown wall-paper, and crushed her handkerchief into a ball between her offendingly seamed fingers.

"Years hence," she thought, "I'll tell Stephen how much I hate brown as a colour. Perfectly filthy, it is.

Perhaps not all brown; but chocolate and wall-paper browns and every faded brown under the sun." She sank into a reverie, in the course of which she skimmed across the years that lay before them in a vista of endless time. She perceived, with a sort of understanding which is not cynicism, but which is the fruit of a girl's early experience of such hard things as want and discomfort, that those years could only be reached with toil—on the part of Stephen—and with endurance upon her own part. She longed for them with a passion that made her really press herself physically together and forward in her chair, as though she were about to leap; but her experience, which had made her a woman years before, when her mother died, kept Dorothy from really happy expectation. She believed in Stephen. She believed that if anybody could manage to bridge those years with means to a wider life, Stephen could do it. But she had no illusion. Stephen might fail. He was living on his brains, working and working and working, without friends, without help, without any real joy that he did not get from the work itself; and he might fail. You couldn't work as he insisted upon doing without injuring yourself. It stood to reason. Here was Roy, content to work his regular hours for fifteen shillings a week, and in the evening to mooch the streets with his boy friends, strolling in the wake of girls who looked back and laughed and waited round corners, and walked back when pursuit ceased. . . . Dorothy knew all about that. She had not done it herself—"That's why I'm here," she thought, "instead of married to thirty shillings a week when I was nineteen, as some of them are"—but she could not help knowing all about it, just as she had smelt Roy's breath the first time he had smoked. . . . And here was Stephen, who until two years ago had been a clerk, just as Roy was, working all day and sometimes far into the night—learning, making up for lost education, gathering

scraps of all sorts, writing, reading, compiling bibliographies, going to the British Museum to "search" on starvation wages, pushing his way slowly into a part of the world that had, socially, no use for him, though at last it would be bound to admit and tolerate his brains. Here, then, was Stephen, making himself a dull boy, steadily wearing out his nerves and his temper and his bodily strength, earning very little money—barely enough to keep them—and growing sore and sulky and pessimistic and gloomy and abstracted and uncommunicative. Why was he doing it? For Roy, she supposed, and for herself; though she knew more of Roy's doings than he seemed to know, and though she would have sacrificed a good deal of her own immunity for the sake of seeing him more cheerful, and for the sake of having some work to do in which she could take an interest. Could anybody take an interest in this ugly old place, with the massy pretentious bell-pulls and brown Venetian blinds, and the everlasting dullness of the ugly brown wall-paper and grey cracked ceilings? Could anybody take an interest in pretending or attempting to keep clean these dead old chairs and eternally dusty tables and ornaments and mantelpieces and washstands and shelves of old books? She could not imagine anybody so lost to a sense of human decency and natural life as to enjoy doing such work. It was like perpetual dish-washing—ugly, depressing, distasteful. It was something to be loathed, never in all her days to be escaped. If only she could have gone to an office! Or if only she could live with Stephen and—reluctantly—with Roy in some spotless little cottage with damask and muslin and print all fresh and never dirty, far from grimy Islington, deep in some soft unapproachable countryside! Where the local vicar, and an ancient gawky farmer or two, and the supercilious maiden ladies who lived in the village, were her visitors, and couldn't help finding their prejudices against her melting

away when they found how simple and unaffected and truly sweet she was! Stephen in that case would be greatly respected—"the writer gentleman from Lunnon" —and the big man of the district would say to him condescendingly, "Oh, are you any relation to the Moore whose last book I have just been reading with inexpressible admiration?" And Stephen would snap out like the Carlyle she figured him—no, he'd be a little shy, and turn away . . . to hide a soft flush. . . . And the big man's sister would say to him, with a melting eye. . . .

Dorothy's reverie was pulled up short by her cold knowledge of facts. It was all very well. Stephen was a great man. She knew what she was talking about. "Years hence" (as she was fond of saying), when he was tired out and could no longer do his best work, he would be proclaimed and celebrated as Phil May was; although his greatness was even now glaringly present, and closely deserved the ecstatic celebration which she was sure went only momentarily astray. But even if he could do it for himself, for her . . . even if he could do it—rather reluctantly she thought it—for Roy, he could never, never, never do it as long as the old man was there like a hideous barnacle . . . horrible spider, a beastly anemone, alive as by instinct to the floating fragments of good fortune which came within his range, absorbing all the good and expelling upon the surface of life the indigestible remnants of his stolen nutriment.

"You see," Dorothy explained to herself after deliberate consideration, "the old man's such a damned rascal!"

iii

If Stephen had come a moment earlier he would have been surprised to hear such a speech from Dorothy. But the words were lost in air by the time the sound of his steps upon the final flight became audible. He came into

the room slowly, rather wearily, and put down along with his hat a couple of books fastened together by a webbing strap. Dorothy instantly whipped the kettle from her oil-stove in the fireplace, where it was sighing indignantly and clouding the air with its vehement breath. When Stephen turned round again the tea was half made, and she was watching the water cream and mantle in the teapot's gloomy vastnesses. As she passed to the table she pressed his arm with an affectionate irrepressible gesture.

"Nice and early," Dorothy said. "Hoped you would be." She smiled at him with quick delight.

Stephen in reply made a sound too much like a grunt to be perfectly responsive to her cheerful greeting, and then, without a further word, seated himself. He was not very tall—about five feet eight—was rather squarely built, walked with a noticeable limp, and his complexion was both dark and pale, almost to sallowness. The face was aggressive, partly because his head was thrown back, partly because Stephen's dissatisfied mouth gave one the expectation of biting speeches. His eyes were very fine, a fact which was due to his brave spirit as well as to that short-sightedness which sometimes makes eyes appear to shine. The air of defiance which characterized his appearance was not without its intriguing powers: one certainly wanted to know more of him, to imagine the reasons and the qualities which gave him an air of stubborn intellectual power. And if Stephen was not strictly handsome he was at least distinguished-looking, for his nose was straight, and his bitter mouth clean-cut. To the eye his beauty might have ended there in a sense of disappointment; but the manner with which he fronted the world—"an eye like Mars, to threaten and command" —was not the surest guide to his nature. If it had been, if the hardness, the coldness which was sometimes attributed to Stephen Moore by patrician critics, educated in

more indulgent methods, had been all that was true about him, he could not have retained the love of his impulsive sister. Dorothy loved him, not thoughtlessly, but deeply and passionately, as a mother might have done. Those whom Dorothy loved had first to prove their integrity, for she was very exacting and saw much further than most girls of her somewhat immature age. Her love for him penetrated even his taciturnity. He was the one *real* person she knew, whose word was truth, whose will was not obstinate weakness, whose intention was not so much honourable as honest. She likened him to a chisel; but it must be supposed that she thought of him as a chisel with a merciful heart and an understanding which, if it was never warm, was at least surprising in its depth and range. It was her particular vanity to believe that she understood him, and that nobody else could do so.

"Beside your plate," Dorothy briefly announced, "is a letter. Kindly read it."

Stephen took up the letter without interest, and opened it immediately.

"Dear Moore," the letter said,—"My father is greatly delighted with what you have written about his book. I understand that you know him well enough to believe that. He wants to see you, and as I have a note of your address I promised to ask you to come up one evening either to dinner or after dinner, or next Sunday, say, to tea. Do try and come. I shall be very glad of an opportunity to talk to you again; and my mother and sister both look forward to your coming. Make it Sunday if you can possibly spare the time. There are some things I should like to show you in daylight—may I mention some Flaxman and Sandys prints? You'll know, after our last talk, why I think of them in connexion with you. Yours sincerely, David Evandine."

Stephen allowed the letter to slide back from his hand to the table, and Dorothy, watching his face for some

sign of pleasure or of displeasure, saw no change at all in his expression. His face, then, told her nothing, and she waited in vain for some further communication.

"Nothing?" she at length asked, almost wistfully, and came near enough to read the first page of the letter, written in David's fine but lazy handwriting. When Stephen answered it was with a reflective hesitation, as though the letter had been unwelcome as suggesting thoughts unconnected with its subject-matter.

"Nothing you'd be interested in."

Dorothy grimaced. It was clear that she was being told to mind her own business.

"It's from the man—or the son of the man—who wrote this week's book," she urged. "I can *see* that much." Stephen's foot tapped irritably.

"Yes, yes. Asking me to go and see them."

"Oh!" Dorothy's tone was one of pleasure. "How nice!"

"But I shan't go."

"You won't go? Why ever not?" She was, to all appearance, amazed. As he did not answer she continued eagerly: "Aren't they very influential people—the Evandines?" Dorothy was so bent upon his career, anxious that he should use every advantage; and yet she was not altogether so experienced in Stephen as to leave the decision to him or even, as an older woman would have done, to appear to do so.

"Influential. . . . What does that matter?" asked Stephen sharply.

"Well, this father person: isn't he a big man, one of the mandarins? Doesn't he write the books that get fawned on by all his newspaper friends?" Dorothy had learned—but never from her brother—a curious sort of inaccurate knowledge of Press methods. She was so entirely partisan that she exaggerated the power of literary snobbishness, far beyond the negligible coterie

and into the whole literary world. Stephen checked her.

"You're talking nonsense," he said.

"What's sense, then?"

"You're bothering me."

"For once. Stephen, dear. Please!"

Unwillingly he responded to her pleading.

"He's a very cultured man who dabbles in books. He's not a critic. Everybody likes him, and knows he's a decent sort. He knows everybody. His books are well written, inaccurate, superficial, and very delightful to read. If you don't know anything—and that's the case with most people—they're extremely good. It's called 'Reading without tears,'" said Stephen perfunctorily.

"But if you go there you'll meet these people, and they'll appreciate you. . . ."

"That's not probable."

"Will they want to know what school you went to?" she flashed at him.

"Yes," Stephen said. "Some of them would."

"The beasts!"

"Don't be silly. Other people spy out your family history. If they're going to 'know' you they want to know where you're from, and what your father was."

"And is!" Dorothy said with a sudden viciousness. "Oh, but your school, Steve! It's too silly. You'll have to say 'privately educated.'" She began to laugh. "But *do* go."

In her pink, starched cotton dress, as she stood before him with rebellious eyes and flushed cheeks, Dorothy looked curiously out of congruity with the words she was using. Although, like her brother, she was dark, she coloured so swiftly, and was so very slight and roguish-looking, that she still looked a child until one saw how wise and motherly were the two brown eyes from which she regarded the world.

Stephen tried to assume that the discussion was ended, and accordingly there was a little silence; but Dorothy's blood was up, and his repressive methods only aroused a determination really more active than his own.

"Shall you go?" she asked him.

"I wish you wouldn't keep on. I don't think I shall go."

"They can't do without you. These people! It's your brains they want."

"You . . . are . . . being . . . very . . . ridiculous," he told her emphatically. "There's absolutely no need to talk in that way. If I write well I shall certainly make money and reputation. If I don't I shall certainly not make a reputation, though I may make money. No amount of excited feeling alters the logic of that. And I prefer to make reputation through work. It's easier and more dignified. Do you suppose a man who goes toting round everywhere gets anything lasting? He may get boosted into jobs for a time; but——"

She interrupted him.

"In the long run, yes, Steve. But editors don't read—you told me that yourself. They meet you at dinner or lunch or tea, and make it a friendly affair."

"You make me very tired, Dorothy," he said. "You've been reading some absurd nonsense—some novel, I expect—and mixing it up with things I've said. You mustn't expect me to make money or reputation quickly, because the whole explanation is simply that I can't and don't write novels. I'm a critic. It's the novelist who has to skip round, so that he can be adored and patronized and written about. And then he sometimes finds that when he sells too largely all his skipping lands him only in a bad Press. He becomes ridiculous and distasteful, and has to console himself with his sales. But that doesn't apply to me."

"You're trying to put me off. I want you to go to the

Evandines, as you're invited. And you won't go because there's some secret reason why you shouldn't." Dorothy was moving impatiently at his wilful stubbornness—with an irritation quite beyond the needs of the moment. That was because memory was stirring in her thoughts, reacting upon her jealousy, her every quick impulse of loyalty and responsibility.

Stephen started. He could not help starting, for her sudden dash into the world of motives had been dictated by that rising anger which pulls away reserves and opens the way for biting disclosures of thoughts long held. Accusations might well follow, showing him an unsuspected Dorothy drawing upon her sequestered stores of intuition concerning him—a dangerous critic, using in her lightning heat words and thoughts that would never be forgotten. Nevertheless he tried to quell her by haughty indifference.

"Secret reason?" he demanded.

"What then? If it's not that, what is it? I think you *ought* to go," she vehemently urged. "I think you owe it to yourself and this man who asks you to go."

Stephen made no reply; and that seemed to move her still nearer to the verge of anger. With a last attempt to reach some simple but convincing reason for his unnecessary refusal to do a pleasant thing for his own good and his own credit, she demanded:

"Is it the old man?" That was always with Dorothy a dominant thought—almost an obsession.

Stephen moved impatiently, obviously relieved and yet impatient at her new course. He pushed his chair back and rose to his feet.

"No, no, no," he said.

"They wouldn't want to come here." She sprang to another difficulty—this time the social one.

"No." He smiled grimly. "There's no chance of that."

"Then why not?"

"I can't tell you."

She searched his face, a sudden dread in her eyes. When he said "I can't tell you" in so final a tone she could say no more than "I wish you would." But this she said in so gentle a voice that Stephen perhaps did not hear her. He slowly reseated himself, and they began their meal in silence. For a long time Dorothy did not speak, but at last she could bear it no longer.

"Is it because you don't trust me, or because it's something unpleasant, Steve?"

Now in his preoccupation, and in the confusion of his manifestly conflicting wishes, Stephen was jangled quite out of patience even by her humble voice.

"Oh, I wish—" he began in a strangled voice. His fierce temper had broken out. It was only with a violent effort that he controlled it. "My dear," he said with a deliberate steadiness, the condescension of which she found unbearable, "I've told you I can't tell you. Don't you see that that's enough?"

"You don't trust me. Me—that only lives . . ." she began gaspingly. "Oh! I know that's not grammar. But I can't bear it, I can't bear it. You ought to tell me. There can be nothing I oughtn't to know. Here are two men. You don't know them well, they're not friends. But you *do know* them. They might help you to do what you want to do. Yet you won't tell me . . . you won't tell me. And, of course, I know very well what it is. I know very well. You won't tell me, but you can't help my knowing more than you think. I know you used to go there. Why, do you think I don't know why? Do you think I suppose it was to talk books . . . to see an old man . . .?" Her voice was trembling, her eyes were moist. She felt the moment was desperate. Stephen was more and more frowning, and his mouth

was more obstinately twisted. . . . "How can you be so . . . like an ostrich . . .?"

In the middle of her passion came an interruption that froze her.

"And what is my daughter agitating herself about?" asked a soothing voice from the doorway. "Not, I hope, any fault in the immaculate Stephen? That would be unbelievable—quite entirely unbelievable!"

Before them stood, swaying very slightly, the tall figure of an elderly man dressed in a blue serge shaped suit which made him appear much younger than his years. Upon his head was a fashionable bowler hat. His beaming eyes shone with a happy light. His teeth, showing in a regularity which, for his age, was quite beyond unquestioning acceptance, were clenched in an immovable smile. His head was very slowly being shaken from side to side, archly, deprecatingly.

"Singularly unusual," he proceeded. "A singularly unusual state of affairs. The immaculate, spotless, wonderful paragon Stephen being subjected to a daughterly tirade. . . . Really quite shocking. . . . Must protest. Must really protest. Simply unable to stand the strain . . . anything so grossly improbable, so astonishing. . . . Sordid. . . . The singularly virtuous and priggish Stephen, to whom we owe our all, our very existence as a family, by his own account, sitting haughtily there listening to perfectly violent tirade from affectionate sister. . . ."

It was the old man.

iv

In manner, the old man easily set an example to his children. His further movements were characterized by a jauntiness and a bodily grace that were peculiar to himself. He removed his hat with an air, and turned towards the table with a slow swing that, even if it

slightly wavered, which his smile never did, was theatrical in its finish. Stephen's perturbed eye took in the spotted-bordered handkerchief that peeped from his father's breast-pocket, the equally spotted bow that symmetrically adorned his father's almost—but not quite—spotless three-inch linen collar. He revolted at so venerable a beau. Yet his father's face, perfectly shaven, was surprisingly fresh and clear; and his father's eyes, although glassy, were bright with the radiance of a healthy liver. Only somehow, to Stephen's fastidious observation, there was something disgusting, almost obscene, in the old man's appearance. It may have been prejudice, but Stephen was certainly aware of it. But then Stephen knew how well the old man could carry his drink, and he knew that this mood of dangerous polish, helped by the graces of a past day, could have been engendered only by a long busy afternoon with the glass and the bottle.

Putting aside the subject upon which he had spoken earlier, the old man suavely turned to Stephen, as if he had been recently introduced.

"Singular pleasure to find you exceedingly early to-night," he gracefully said. "By no means excepted . . . expected. We understand, my boy. Yes, we understand. The old man . . ." He broke off with dignity, nodding, and saying, several times over, the word "Yes." When Stephen moved away from the table he started, and smiled tenderly and inquiringly. "What was that? Did you speak?" he asked. Now it was remarkable that neither Dorothy nor Stephen had spoken at all since the old man's entrance, as he presently seemed to become aware; for he again stood up, and then, with increased dignity, went out of the room and up the stairs. They heard him turn the key in the door of his bedroom.

A sigh broke from Dorothy.

"Sickening," she said. "Perfectly sickening. Stephen,

forget that I was waxy. I didn't mean to be. But oh! Steve, *do* go to the Evandines. Even to get away from the old man for a bit. Wouldn't it be beastly if he insisted on calling on them? I hid the letter when he came in. He'd go and call, and sit there talking, and they'd never know he was . . . and he'd borrow half a crown —or try to—from the maid. He'd go back. 'Singularly unfortunate—left my purse.' And he'd go over and over again. How *do* people escape the old man? Does he get tired of them?"

"I expect so," Stephen answered. "Who knows?"

"He makes you wretched, I know," she went on. "So he does me. But not so wretched as he makes you. I think he hates you, Stephen." Stephen took no notice, but unstrapped his two review books in order to look more closely at them. "I believe you hate him."

Stephen was wondering where the old man had obtained the money for his carouse. It was a constant subject for speculation, for sometimes the signs so visible to-day had in the past been accompanied by the loss of books, or clothing, or even small pieces of furniture, all of which, where possible, had had to be redeemed. Stephen knew that some impulse more insistent than the mere desire for rest or solicitude must have taken the old man up to his bedroom. He was trying to remember any illuminating bulge in the old man's coat. But as that opened such a field of useless speculation he took the books over to the window, and sat there with them while Dorothy cleared the table. There was no smile on Stephen's face. He seriously opened one of the books and deliberately cut a page so that he might read the preface. This was the work by which he would pay next week's housekeeping expenses. It was bread and butter for them all, and part of it was possibly stimulant for the insatiable old man. If Dorothy, with her incorrigible forward-looking to some favourable time

"years hence," could think hopefully of the future, Stephen could not, for the sake of his immediate self-respect, see any such seductive vista. For him the first need was the means of livelihood. If he, too, had his dreams they were never expressed, and perhaps he had no dreams. Perhaps he had had dreams in the past—too many dreams—all now overwhelmed by inexorable circumstances through which he could penetrate only by strict attention to business. His face lost its defiance as he read, and Dorothy crept about on tiptoe until she had finished her work.

Once or twice she stole a glance at him as he sat by the window. The sunlight had risen above the tops of the opposite houses, and the whole street was in shadow. The sky was filmed over with the first dimness of the long evening to come. In the street there were only occasional sounds, and only at intervals could Dorothy hear the tramcars grinding along the Upper Street, or their rivals the red motor-omnibuses blaring out a dull buzz-rumble as they swayed past the end of the road. It was very quiet that evening, very still and hot, but even here not oppressive. Dorothy fell again into a reverie. It seemed to her so pleasant to be in the room with Stephen, in spite of the fact that she must not speak to him during his work. She caught his profile silhouetted against the light, his head bent over the book; and it made her eyes soften to see the black curls clustering so crisp and strong above his ears. In this light he looked almost handsome, she thought. If only— But if she began to think in that way she would only make herself miserable; and if she were miserable she always felt very lonely, quite cut off from any sort of life apart from Stephen . . . and Roy . . . and the old man. Poor old Stephen!

Thinking that, Dorothy looked at him again. To her inexpressible astonishment he was smiling to himself, the book lying as it were dead upon his hands. He was no

more reading that book than she was! Instinctively she jerked her eyes away, and a frown gathered. What was he thinking about? She remembered her own angry words, and was swept again by the jealousy created by her impulsive guess. It thrilled her from head to foot, so that she almost exclaimed aloud in her sudden passion. Only by clenching her hands hard did Dorothy check some sound.

When the gust had passed she once more turned upon him that searching childish gaze that read plain messages from his face and his attitudes. The smile had gone. In its place reigned dejection. She had seen him look tired, and gloomy, and angry; but never before had she seen him look so clearly without hope. In that moment even Dorothy's spirit quailed. She had surprised, it seemed, the innermost secret of her brother's heart. If it was despair; if Stephen truly saw no future but disaster, of what good were her own inventings? And why did he despair? There was so much she did not know. Just as she could only feel through her love that Stephen was wise as a critic, and distinguished as a writer, so she could only—in the last resort—*pretend* that she understood him. It was the hardest blow to her pride to realize this. She could not face it in its bare truth. She had always to slur over her difficulties and her mystifications. How impossible it was to keep silent any longer! She could not do it!

"Steve, dear . . ."

Dorothy was quite close to him, her arm round his shoulders, her sweet soft cheek against his own. Stephen returned to a consciousness of the room, of his book; marvelling at her perception of his mood, but shy again into brusqueness lest she should intrude too nearly into his lately engrossing reflections. Their eyes met, hers beseeching, his quickly veiled.

"Dorothy!" he was protesting; when she pressed her

face closer, so that, cheek to cheek, he might be unable to see her at all.

"Steve . . . I want you so much to go," she whispered. "*Do* go. I want you to." Then, breathlessly, plunging once and for all to the farthest point of her most intense intuition, she said, so low as barely to be heard: "If she's any good at all she'll . . . know. Only, my dearest, *tell her!*"

Stephen felt her tremble as she clung to him. He kissed her.

"You don't in the least understand," he whispered back. "You're inventing a story. There's nothing . . . nothing. I'll think of it. Now stop!"

Dorothy drew quickly away again, but she caught his hand and pressed it. She never forgot that evening and his sudden gentleness; for her excited miserable happiness and the mystified convinced ignorant guess which swam together in her heart and brain made there such a confusion, a sort of emotional *mélange,* as to leave her almost dizzy with apprehensiveness. She guessed that everybody was much less simple than she had assumed. Was she, therefore, wrong? Stephen's face had recovered its normal look, so baffling, so unreadable. Dorothy could not help shrugging her shoulders. The half-elate fraction of consciousness which she felt they had shared was lost to all save memory. She was left still groping for the difficulty. Only she was now sure, from his acceptance of her meaning, that she had located the geographical point at which the difficulty might be said to lie. The clue was somehow to be found at the Evandines, of whom she knew nothing whatever. And it was to be found in a passionate secret.

CHAPTER III: STEPS TOWARDS LIGHT

i

ON Sunday afternoon Stephen Moore, dressed to Dorothy's approval in a suit of blue serge much less stylish than his father's, and a brown soft felt hat of a venerable character, started out from his home to walk along the Upper Street until he reached Highbury. This he did in order to economize upon his fare. He then took a rather crowded tramcar as far as the Archway Tavern; and his transport difficulties became acute. The red and cream tramcars which run between Upper Holloway and High Barnet begin—or, at that time, began, since it is true that in these days different arrangements exist—their journey at the Archway Tavern, just beside a huge, gaunt workhouse infirmary. So popular, however, is the Barnet journey—at any rate as far as the Finchley cemetery—that huge crowds congregate at the starting-point and require police regulation lest those of giant's strength should exercise a tyranny by using it in a pellmell rush for the tramcar. And it was at the end of a long queue, magically extended, a moment after his arrival, by many more people who poured from every quarter, that Stephen was forced to take his place. The huge trams slid down the hill, unloaded, and drew like great ships up to the level of the waiting crowd; filled again, and gallantly rode once more to the romantic North. Tram after tram did this, until Stephen despaired of ever reaching his destination. Even when his turn came at last, while he and many more were still pressing and clinging on their way to seats, the gongs sounded and this tram also moved off, between the infirmary and

the low college buildings opposite. Up under the high archway that now spans the road it ground its way; past that romantic junction of Archway Road with North Hill, Highgate, which marks the beginning of the Great North Road; farther to Finchley; and so on to Whetstone, where Totteridge Lane ran westward and in the direction of the Evandines' home. There, where he first again saw stretching fields of radiant green, Stephen descended from the tram and prepared to walk the rest of his journey.

It was impossible for him to avoid noticing as he walked how the air changed; how the molten sky of Islington had become the fathomless blue of the country; and how the larks sang their thrilling rapture overhead. He could hardly make any progress down the slow hill from the main road for gazing up at the cloudless sky and loosing his cramped spirit among the sweetly singing birds. To one whose days were spent among houses, in hot streets, and in never-ending application, this day seemed of all others like a happy promise not easily to be reconciled with his patient thoughts. And more, it recalled with painful vividness and precision the last journey he had made upon this very road. The memory and the thoughts that it evoked brought him once to a standstill with a checked groan upon his lips. For a moment his steps faltered; he almost turned back along the road—back to Islington and the work and the whole situation he had left. It seemed for that moment that he could not bear to go forward. Why should he go? What good lay before him at his journey's end? Only pain, embarrassment, humiliation, could come of this visit. Why should he revive all that had helped to make the last three years a numbed and miserable struggle with penury, when they might gladly have been given to the eager striving for name and power which so long ago he had imagined? True, he had learned a great deal

about himself in the three years. He had learned some at least of his limitations. But to recognize these was never to accept them. The recognition had only made ambition the keener and the more bitter. Stephen's face grew set; the hard lines in his brow and round his mouth were like gashes as he walked; his eyes, which were like steel, darkened until it seemed that the pupils had overspread the iris to the very edge. As he brooded, so his steps grew slower, more uncertain; so his shoulders bent and his movements became heavy, and his course upon the roadway less direct.

And it was while he was thus thinking, while his mind was thus in torment, that Stephen heard as in a dream the rough insistent hooting of a motor-horn, so close behind him that it seemed to screech in his ear; and a light-coloured car brushed past his elbow, almost touching him. The occupant of the car, turning, waved his arm, and impatiently cried, "Keep on the path, you fool! . . . keep on the path!" And Stephen, roused suddenly, stung by the man's insolent manner, burning with vengefulness, shouted back in a hoarse voice of passion, "Go to hell!" trembling and breathing fast at the motorist's ever-ready assumption of the wayfarer's inferiority. If it had not been too late he would have struck as blindly as he spoke, so keenly had his anger been awakened; but the motor was already far ahead, and out of reach even of any verbal challenge. He was thoroughly awake now, still resentful of the incident as marking the old savage grievance of every man who has been born poor. This was its significance—not that a single unidentified motorist had insulted him, not that the motorist had been within an ace of injuring him; but that a member of one class had assumed a right over a member of a poorer class, a prior claim to the common road, based upon his power of superior speed. While to the driver Stephen was simply a dawdling fool, to Stephen in his surge of reaction

the driver was representative of his species. Such an individual claim will always awaken in poor men resentment against a class.

That was the first meeting of Stephen Moore and Hilary Badoureau.

ii

Thus it happened that there was a large gathering that Sunday afternoon at Stalcett, the Evandines' home. Ethel Clodd was there, with her brother, cloaked in decency. Hilary was there. Stephen, arriving much later, ill-tempered and dusty, was there. Agg had arrived uninvited, and so had a very deaf professor of Romance languages and Romance in general—a man upon whom Romance had taken apparently a cruel revenge for his too assiduous and academic pursuit, since he was markedly decrepit. When, therefore, Stephen was led out of doors, by that same door through which Priscilla and her mother had entered when Mr. Vanamure visited them, his heart was like lead in his breast. It was too bad to ask him to meet a crowd of people he did not know! With all the arrogance of the timid and solitary person he felt it as an affront. It made him conscious of his clothes and his dusty boots, his old hat, his ignorance of the etiquette governing conduct in such a group. And that nervous arrogance reacted upon his manner, making it almost noticeably brusque, and making him feel all the inconveniences resulting from the behaviour of conventionally bred people towards those whom they regard as ill-bred, or towards those who regard themselves as ill-bred. Stephen knew, of them all, only the Evandines. He had never met even Agg, whose rather bizarre personality was familiar to most of those engaged in writing or reading books.

As a cricketer in an international match feels when without having scored he returns over miles of close-

shaven grass to the dismally silent pavilion, so Stephen, ushered so far by the perfect Biddy, felt in crossing that large lawn to the group standing far away in the shadow. Biddy's manner, as tactful as that of a hostess, had given him no hint of shortcoming; but he had flushed to see his hat so patently dilapidated in her hand, and with chagrin he had heard his own steps clatter during the journey upon the uncarpeted edge of a long passage. And now, when Biddy, seeing that Stephen was observed and recognized, was giving way, he seemed bereft of all support. But at that moment David came running towards him, and in the quick hand-clasp there was the first hint of friendship. It was not enough to make the unwilling visitor comfortable; but it was a beginning. Then he saw Mrs. Evandine, then was introduced to the Clodds and to Professor Tidd and to Agg. To all of these he bowed impatiently, hating them for his own hot, dusty shabbiness. But his eye was furtively searching for another figure, and his heart was heavily beating at her absence. Priscilla was not there. She was not there. Not there, not there, beat his heart. He could not hear what they were saying. Was it possible that she was away, that he would not see her? Stephen knew now, without any disguise, that he had come only to see Priscilla. Everything else meant the merest weariness of polite intercourse, which to one of his temper was a long exasperation. In such turbulent distress was his mind when he awoke to find that Mrs. Evandine was speaking to him.

"Sit here, Mr. Moore," she was saying. "It's so very long since we saw you; and I want you to tell me what you've been doing."

Stephen shot at Mrs. Evandine a look that was sullen with his disappointment and with the still-pervading sense of shame and chagrin resulting from his dustiness; and the potent resentment which he still felt for the motorist's

rudeness; and the feeling that when all was said and done he had not wanted to come and wished he had stayed away. He supposed from her courteous tone that the social baiting had begun.

"I've been working," he said.

"*All* the time?" she rather archly inquired. Then, as he frowned, she continued, with a quick glance at David, who was talking at a little distance with Agg, "I wondered whether you had moved quite far away; but from what David says you must be still in Islington."

"Yes, I'm still there."

"Well, won't you try to come and see us more often? You know, don't you, that we should really like you to come?"

To that there was no answer.

"I'm afraid I forget," she went on, with that sort of persistent disregard of pauses which all hostesses cultivate, "whether you live alone or with your family. Which is it? Please forgive me, and tell me; because I'm really very interested, and should like to know."

"I live with my father and a brother and sister in rooms in Slapperton Street," said Stephen with a defiant sense of discouraging disclosure.

"A sister? You have a sister?" asked Mrs. Evandine, although she could not help being amused at his grave pronunciation of a name so unusual. "Wouldn't you like to bring her to see us one time?"

"It's very kind . . ." he grumbled.

"I should like it so much. I expect the house you live in is a very large old house, isn't it? I can remember . . ."

Her attempt to suggest that he lived in a large old house in a tedious district for any other reason than the real and glaring one was too dexterous. Somehow the reference to Dorothy and Roy, followed by this later effort, made Stephen's blood boil. He saw Mrs. Evan-

dine's very gentle, very charming face, was acutely conscious of her beautiful fawn-coloured dress, of her graceful coiffure; and of the fact that she had never in all the days of her life for one single moment felt the desperate need of money, or rest, or food. He thought of Dorothy at home, who would have thought this house and this inexhaustible garden a dream of Paradise—keeping cheerful in her common run of monotonous days by God only knew what subtle alchemy, and never knowing or having known the unalloyed pleasure of young life. He thought of Roy at uncongenial work at an age when Mrs. Evandine's son had been happily at a public school. He thought of himself as a child and boy, often without food, always penniless, tramping London ill-clad and with barely a home to return to. He thought of his lot and hers, and his heart burned at her smiling inquiries about his sister and brother—whom she had never seen, in whom as living realities she could not be interested, whose wretched childhood he knew with the bitter knowledge not only of personal experience, but of anxious responsibility. The incongruity between that life as he had endured it and the sweet ease of this kind, generous, sympathetic woman was so tragically clear to him that he could hardly breathe. It was so clear that he felt he could no longer bear to answer her questions. He did not do her any injustice. He only saw that she could have no possible understanding of poverty as he and his sister and brother had known and suffered it. That was why Stephen brushed aside her questions with one glance of impatience. His sullenness was gone, and with it his awkward demeanour. He next spoke to her as to an equal.

"Mrs. Evandine," he said with extraordinary earnestness, and an address so candid as to beautify his expression to her eager eye. "I'm not ashamed of being poor, although it sometimes humiliates me. But it wounds me

very much to feel that you . . . think it necessary to be conversationally polite to me."

Mrs. Evandine flushed faintly. His truthfulness was unexpected and quite undesirable. But as they were apart from the others, and as he had spoken very quietly and, as it seemed to her, very much at the impulse of some strong feeling, she did not hesitate.

"You are doing me an injustice," she said. "I have not once thought of your being poor. If I knew it, it was with sympathy—with admiration for you. I think you are quite misunderstanding me. You hurt me very much."

The disarming gentleness of her answer made Stephen realize as nothing else could have done his breach of taste, and made him aghast at his own clumsiness in thus wounding a nature so sensitive and so perfectly kind; but although his sullenness was gone, he still continued to struggle with his awakened pride and with the thoughts by which his pride had been aroused and bruised.

"And I'm being savagely rude," he said in a quick shame.

"I'm afraid you are," agreed Mrs. Evandine cordially. But Stephen could see that she was smiling, though his protest had hurt her so much that her eyes were full of tears.

"I'm very sorry. I'm so *very* sorry," he began to stammer, increasingly and painfully repentant. "I beg your pardon. I hate to go among people I don't know. I don't know how to behave. I . . ." How could he be sufficiently humble? Her pretty, moved expression made her just like Priscilla—as young and gentle and appealing. "As you can see, I'm an egoist," he stumbled on. "Just a clumsy fellow. And . . . and I've just been made very indignant by something that happened on the way here. I'm not in a fit state to speak to you. Do please forgive me."

"And you'll believe me in return?" she asked, really triumphant at the discovery of his heart, but very well aware that her own was uncomfortably beating.

"Every word."

"Tell me what was the thing that happened. . . . Oh, there's Priscilla at last."

Stephen's heart stabbed him and began to race. Where, then, was she? His hungry glance went in search of her. There, coming towards them across the lawn, as lovely as she had ever been, in an exquisite soft dress of flowered muslin, and without a hat, was Priscilla. She was the same, the same. Unchanged still in her incomparable simplicity. Stephen could not think; he could only stand lonely among the others, waiting to meet her as if there had never been any interruption of their sweet friendship. Yet as Priscilla came to him and he took her hand she saw only his stern face, and the old bitter unsatisfied mouth, and the scrupulously veiled eyes; and her own lips trembled at her childish disappointment, too poignant for thought. . . . It was all over in a single moment, and it was nothing. They had met again, and it was nothing—simply as though their hearts had stopped beating, and as though their eyes had become blind. Only afterwards, when the blood flowed back to their hearts, they would remember, and when their eyes were next closed they would see indelibly mirrored each tiniest movement of their meeting, and hear again the sounds of the garden and the trees, which formed its undersong. When it was perhaps too late for everything but inexpressible regret. . . .

Behind Priscilla was Hilary, tall, beautiful, smiling, and wholly confident.

iii

It was at this moment that, by a circuitous route, Romeo joined the company, stealing gently over the

grass to Priscilla's side. Romeo, amid, upon the Evandines' part, a hushed silence, advanced towards Stephen, sniffed in a gingerly fashion at his trouser leg and his dusty boot, to which Stephen imagined that every eye now finally turned, and at last, with tail sweeping in the air, rubbed his head against Stephen's leg. Priscilla watched the event with a tremulous sigh; her mother and brother with interested gravity. Awkwardly, noticing the silence, and hardly knowing what he did, Stephen bent and stroked Romeo's head. To the Evandines' inexpressible joy Romeo pushed Stephen's hand from his head, and, steadying it with a single alert paw, licked the hand three times before brushing it affectionately with his face. Stephen, looking up, met their awed eyes.

"All very satisfactory, I think?" David inquired seriously.

"Splendid!" said both Priscilla and Mrs. Evandine.

"What's the ceremony?" asked Hilary, standing close to Priscilla.

"Romeo captivated by Moore," explained David. To which Hilary's rather blank face and air of chagrin seemed to respond, "More than I am!" Hilary and Stephen were then introduced, and they shook hands. If Hilary recognized the pedestrian he gave no sign. Only Stephen knew and never forgave.

iv

For half an hour Stephen and David talked of various things, while Hilary went off to play tennis with Priscilla and the Clodds. They talked of many books and men and pictures, and in their talk Stephen found his discomfort vanishing, and David found his respect increased. It was David's way to listen, and to prompt; and it was Stephen's way to talk bluntly and quickly when he had

been made to talk at all. Both learned, Stephen by testing his own ideas, David by receiving new impressions. At last they strolled indoors, and up to David's rooms, where Stephen saw for the first time some prints of pictures by the real Post-Impressionists, of whom David had heard at the time when the Continent had heard of them, and long before the first Grafton Gallery exhibition in London. He also saw one or two original drawings, at times painfully scraped, but all wonderfully full of colour, by Ospovat; and a very tiny unfinished sketch in water-colour by Conder. Other people, of course, possessed and possess works by these artists, and in England it is almost one of the correct things to have them; but David had these prints and drawings because he really liked them, and his interests were very genuine, even if they were not wholly concerned with pictorial art. He also possessed many beautiful, and one or two rare, books of various kinds, over which Stephen for short intervals pored, patting them as he spoke, in order to emphasize his arguments. Even when David wandered into the subject of music Stephen was interested, though his actual acquaintance with modern music was small, and his technical knowledge negligible. So a friendship began between the two young men, and as they lounged in this lovely room, as fresh as its own clear pale wall-paper and decorations, Stephen entirely lost sight of his boots, and his dusty anger, and all that moroseness that had grown in his nature out of privation and the difficulties with which he had ever to fight.

He developed into a strange Stephen, as young as his host—or younger, because his knowledge was all the result of personal discovery, while David knew a great deal by education, by convention, and by tradition. The Stephen thus revealed was one who was unknown to everybody, even to himself, who was so rarely untrammelled as to be never entirely care-free. He laughed, his

eyes glowed, his manner grew ingenuous, boyish; and David felt as though there was some of that enviable quicksilver in Stephen which so many men to their undying sorrow lack. He was delighted at his discovery of a new personality, rich in interest for this curiously detached youth, who made personality his incessant study.

At last they spoke of the article on Mr. Evandine's book, the reading of which had been the beginning of David's interest in a young writer whose name he had once or twice noticed for individual work, and whose acquaintance he had casually made at a tea-table in a strange restaurant.

"My father's a very curious man. He can see the quality of that criticism. He'd be the first to speak of it. But it discomposes him. I think he actually would rather not bring himself to relate it to his own conception of criticism. . . . I suppose it simply is that he belongs to a dying school——"

"Educated men with a taste for letters," commented Stephen.

"Exactly. Excellent taste. . . ."

"No analytical power."

"Possibly." David was not surprised at these cryptic passing opinions. "The style has been to say something about everything in a pleasing way. Now your work's different, of course. I should think criticism of that sort is always worth while for its own sake. I mean, as a thing done once for all, and an opinion formed and expressed. But does it pay?" David shot that question suddenly at his companion. Stephen raised quiet eyes to meet his glance.

"Well, no . . ." he hesitatingly acknowledged. "No."

"You can write like that for *The Norm,* because *The Norm's* a hobby. But not for other papers, I suppose?"

"I don't write for any others."

David was drawn up sharply by such an admission. How on earth, then, did Stephen snatch a living? He could not bluntly put the question, any more than he could demand to know what Stephen did with himself when he was not writing occasional two-guinea articles for *The Norm.*

"How did you get on to *The Norm?*" he asked instead.

"Sent them some stuff and asked for work. I didn't get it for a long time. Then, when I tried again last year, they sent me a novel to review, and somebody asked me to go up and see him, because I slated it too hotly and showed I knew nothing at all about current novels. But they took me on, and I work pretty regularly for them, doing short notices, and sometimes a long one like that of your father's book."

"Isn't that rather stiff work?" asked David horrified. "Why it . . . surely . . . I mean, they don't pay very much for work of that sort."

"I've got to live. I just manage, with other work—not writing."

"Do you know Selby or Jaggers, who do the books for the *Morning News?*"

"No."

"Know any of these people?"

"No."

"I dare say I could introduce you to them."

"I can't write puffs."

David did not laugh at Stephen's speech. It was not spoken with juvenile contemptuousness, but with a sort of wistful admission of incapacity.

"Will you let me talk to Selby? I couldn't be sure of him."

"I'd rather you didn't," Stephen said uncomfortably. "I think I'd rather . . ."

David did not want, of course, to seem inquisitive or to be interfering. Yet here was this man practically

wasting because he lacked friends and because he was relying solely on virtue to carry the day.

"Not if you'd rather not," said David quickly. "You don't much care about prancing round? Of course it's beastly. I say, did I show you this little thing?" He drew attention to a picture by the window, representing in line, very simply, the Annunciation. "That's a thing Badoureau—that's the fair man you saw in the garden—got me last month. It's by a young man. He's doing some work for my firm now. Rather fresh, don't you think?"

Stephen examined the picture. He said he thought it very sensitive; but David's last words had stopped his thoughts, and when they were again in motion their current, and in fact the current of this conversation, had entirely changed.

"Is . . . is Badoureau an artist?" he asked quietly.

David laughed a little, and looked out of the window as he answered.

"He'd tell you he was a connoisseur, I expect." After a pause he went on. "No, he's a man of means, who's not like us. He was at Oxford with me. Do you like him?"

"No," said Stephen. "He nearly ran me over this afternoon, and swore at me."

"Really! The old rough! Well, I hope you swore back."

"I did." But Stephen knew from David's tone, from David's hesitation over the word "connoisseur," everything that it was possible for him to learn about Badoureau and Badoureau's wishes. Well, was it not what he had expected? Had he ever faced any other conclusion? He knew he had not. He knew that he had never been in a position to consider any other end to his story. He had always recognized that to marry Priscilla was something forbidden to him. But that did not make

the grinding pain any less, or serve now to check the sense of jealous dislike of Hilary which he uncontrollably felt. David saw the old expression return to Stephen's face, and could not fathom the cause.

V

So immersed had they been that time had passed more rapidly than either could have imagined. To their surprise a thumping gong sounded racketing through the house.

"Good gracious! Supper!" cried David.

"Oh, I must go. I've been keeping you talking . . ."

"Nonsense. Of course you'll stay."

"No, no." Stephen's thoughts had made him afraid of meeting Priscilla again. "I couldn't. These clothes . . ."

"We never change on Sundays. You must see my father. Those decent mugwumps you saw in the garden will all be gone. Besides, man, I want to *go on* talking!"

He spoke so charmingly, so naturally, that Stephen could not help laughing again; and they ran into the bathroom, which was on the same landing. Then Stephen, with a breathlessness out of all keeping with the seriousness of the subject, exclaimed:

"Couldn't you give me a brush, or duster, or something, to take the dust off these damned boots?"

It was the significant indication of some new spirit working in him. With his boots clean he could even face Priscilla, it seemed! Really, what had worked the change was that he hoped Badoureau had gone with the decencies; and in the dreadful hope that he might actually speak with Priscilla he revived. He could not lose that one last desperate joy of seeing her, of hearing her speak. In his excitement Stephen was shivering, as if a cold draught of excitement had cut across his preoccupations and lifted him from despair into a sort of mad exhilarated

carelessness. Nothing mattered, so long as he might see her. And then? He would not think. It was not fit that he should contemplate before the hour that creeping numbness of the spirit that would steal upon him as he journeyed homeward. Then he might know that everything was gone except the daily need of exertion, the endless vista of days employed in task-work, and evenings with the old man, with Roy, and with Dorothy. Until then, in the spirit of that ancient person who said, "Eat, drink, and be merry; for to-morrow we die," he would take with humble enjoyment the satisfactions that might fall to him.

He followed David down the wide staircase, in a dream.

vi

When Stephen saw Priscilla standing in the room his face turned white. His heart seemed to be beating in his throat. Priscilla also was pale. She, too, had had her moments of inexpressible pain since Hilary had gone and she had been alone. She silently listened to Stephen as he responded to her father; she was aware of him all the time as he sat beside her at the table. All those months, those empty months as they now seemed, had been obliterated, and were as though they had never been. Not Priscilla's part now to question. Too clearly she saw that Stephen had been in her heart all the time—Stephen and only Stephen, in all the smouldering passion that this new coming had started into fresh flame. For Priscilla the issue was simple; her fear simply that Stephen did not need her, did not love her. Without looking directly at him she knew that his face was changed. It had hardened. Why had he not come? Why had he ever ceased to come? That was the question that had hurt her all the time during these three years. Why, too, had he changed? And what at this

moment did he feel? Impossible to read that stern face: impossible equally to trace feeling in the blunt voice with which he answered her father. In her mind the one little thread of wonder seemed to vibrate, never stopping, always concerned only with the cardinal fact that she loved him and with the one doubt of his love for her.

To Mrs. Evandine, who saw the picture before her with sure understanding, there was no question of the love upon either side. She knew that if neither Priscilla nor Stephen looked or spoke it was because their feelings were the same. Yet, confronted as she had been that other day with a revelation that explained many things which had been dark, she was still undecided, and still afraid of some too precipitant action which might result in calamity. If love were all! she thought, with her grave, warm, patient eyes bent upon Stephen. If she could fathom honesty it was here; but so were suffering and pride, and so was one feature that she dreaded most of all—an air of endurance, almost of embittered submission. Such a man, Mrs. Evandine thought, might love, and give; but he might be blind, and he might prove so scrupulous, so patient, and—in the feminine sense—so stupid, as to make marriage a steady failure in the finer sympathies. On the merely economic side, which to Stephen was the spectre, Mrs. Evandine, in her inexperience of what poverty implied, was only a little dubious. She cared more that Priscilla should be happy. But had Stephen that verve, that imagination, that—in a word—that self-confidence which would allow him to give freely and inexhaustibly and to evoke in Priscilla those rarer and deeper traits which at present were only partially developed? For answers to her doubts Mrs. Evandine wanted time. She had seen nothing three years before, until Stephen had stopped coming. She had heard from Priscilla nothing but the story of a trifling disagreement—of an argument which had arisen between the

two, of Stephen's cynical attitude, of the eager championship of a friend by Priscilla, and of their momentary estrangement. Apart from that, nothing. Priscilla had been very young, and the matter had seemed to her of little moment. She did not know even that Priscilla had written at the time a letter to Stephen, until she had seen Stephen's reply, which she had been discreet enough not to read and not to mention, and of whose contents she therefore remained ignorant.

These were Mrs. Evandine's thoughts as she saw the lovers and left the present to the good judgment of both. In the meantime she still preoccupied herself with the future and hesitated to decide even in her own mind the points upon which the happiness of her daughter's whole life depended. Suddenly her eyes softened as she saw Priscilla and Stephen look directly at one another.

vii

An hour later, when they walked in the garden in the slow mild moonlight which flooded the lawn with white and threw strange steel-blue shadows everywhere, it seemed inevitable that the two should walk together. While David went on before them, his arm linked in his mother's arm, Priscilla and Stephen lingered, as silent as the night, listening only to the hushing breeze and the faint echo of London traffic far to the south, afraid to speak in case the spell of their secret passion should be broken. From the great lawn before the house they crossed the tennis-lawn, and wandered down a flagged path under budding rambler roses into a small Dutch garden that seemed to them in its conventional beauty a world apart from the rest of life. It was only then, when they were quite alone, that Priscilla, with heart that was like to break at the evening's beauty and her own exalted mood, said, "Stephen . . . you never came.

Why did you never come?" She was like a child that had been left lonely, wistfully asking for comfort.

The hour had struck. He might have meant in all honour to go silently away, and to devote himself to forgetting that Badoureau loved Priscilla, and that his own duties and commitments were such as to tie him to celibacy. But when Priscilla, putting aside all those things which she might have said to indicate a simple kindness, deliberately spoke to him as to one from whom she expected to hear the truth, he could do nothing but answer her question. But it was with fear that he made the admission.

"I was afraid to come."

Priscilla shuddered very slightly.

"If you had come. . . . Were you afraid that I was too stupid to be ashamed afterwards?"

"I was afraid to come because I found how much I loved you, Priscilla."

If Priscilla's voice had trembled, Stephen's sounded dry with a sort of parched huskiness. But the words were spoken; both now knew the truth. Their unhappiness, if that had been unhappiness which perhaps was only suspense, was lightened. For a moment they did not speak, but, trembling, continued to walk by the sharply cut and strangely carven bushes of the garden. Then, with a resolve fully formed, Stephen began to speak, very quickly, and with an absolute trust that made Priscilla's heart swell.

"If I had come, and if I had said that the thing that made me angry was simply that I was in love with you. . . . It could never have been honest. It isn't honest of me to say this now; but I must speak to you. . . . I couldn't be silent. You know I'm not alone. I have others to think of—I had you as well. I mean that I am very poor, never likely to have any sort of—liberty even. You see, I love you. I couldn't keep away when this

opportunity . . . But if I may tell you that I love you."

"Oh, but to have waited three years—" she began, in a quivering tone. "To leave me unknowing."

"Priscilla!"

Stephen had taken her hand, and raised it so that her arm lay in his, and their hands together, pressed very firmly, as if he would convey to her thus the contrition and half-bewildered exultancy that his tone might already have confessed. So, for a little, they walked; until Priscilla slowly withdrew her fingers from his, not unkindly but with a nervous impulse to be free.

"I loved you too, Stephen. I do love you now. . . . I can't bear you to be so humble. . . ."

"Oh, my dearest!" he cried in a broken voice, appalled at the swift imagining of what that knowledge might have meant to them both. "When I've tried so hard—worked so bitterly. I couldn't think it. How *could* I think it? When I'm so base, so spoiled. And when everything went against me I *couldn't* tell you. To come to you so broken, so hopeless. How could I have done it?"

"But what does it matter, Stephen? If you're poor and . . . Couldn't you have let me help you?" Her voice failed. Wearily she interrupted herself. "Oh, no: I'm only being stupid."

Eagerly he tried to bridge the discrepancy in their knowledge.

"Priscilla, you simply could not understand—your mother doesn't understand—how poor we are . . . have always been. You think poverty is something uncomfortable—a trouble—an inconvenience. You don't know what it is not to have enough food. You couldn't know what poverty really means. The thought of your suffering what I've suffered all my life—even in these last years—is impossible. If I'd been really . . . if my love were unselfish I could never have come to-day. It

was a weakness, a sort of hideous temptation. I came only to see you—once. Then, never to come again."

"To leave me?" She *couldn't* understand.

Stephen turned away in despair, flinging out his hands; but he again began to speak in the same agitated dry voice that she had heard throughout.

"Do I seem cowardly?" he asked. "I don't want to be that. But if you could realize the contrast between *your* life and mine, you would understand how hateful I seem to myself even in telling you that I love you. I had no idea of doing it. I've thought of you as forgetting me, as marrying—God forgive me, I've thought you might even be married. . . . And I've tried to be glad of it, glad to think that the danger was over."

"The danger?" she quickly interposed. "You *must* explain to me."

"The temptation. Not the temptation, not the love; but the dreadful stealthy *hope* that always keeps maddening me, and slowly . . . I've tried to crush it. It is an agony. . . ."

"But why," Priscilla asked in a bewildered voice; "but why should you try to crush it? Love's not a wicked thing, is it, Stephen?" Then, very low, she added: "If it is, how wicked I must be."

Even as she spoke, Priscilla gave a quick choking sob and was in his arms, her face cold against his cheek, her lips like sudden stone against his own. For that moment there was nothing else—only the blind turning to each other, denying the validity of any words or thoughts or reasons, of two mortals helplessly enmeshed in the moon's light and the moon's bright madness. Whatever might follow, for that instant no other action had been possible. It was not even a source of happiness, but of consolation alone. As their cheeks lay together, and her soft hair touched his face like the fulfilling of a sweetest dream, it was Stephen who was the more unhappy; because to

him the future was dark with admitted duties. He alone saw that he could not forsake Dorothy, and Roy, and that nothing upon earth could clear him of the strangling weeds of his father's manner of life. He might verbally repudiate; but inexorable fact would presently destroy him. And in this confession of her love, sweet though it was, exquisite to him in its desperate sense of wonder, Stephen read only a deserted trust, an injury to his love, who so loved him that she would not admit his cowardice.

"Do you think I'm a coward?" he whispered. "My dearest, I love you, I love you."

Slowly Priscilla drew her face back, and their eyes met, dark and strange in the faint light.

"You're not a coward. I trust you," she said. For a moment they stood embraced, until remembrance came to both. "And we must go on walking in the garden," Priscilla continued, "though I hate to say it; because the others will be coming to look for us. But you must tell me presently what we are to do. I'll do what you tell me to do. I love you enough to do that. And you must be very brave. And bold. You'll be that, won't you, Stephen? Because you know I've been awfully unhappy and afraid you would never come. And now I wholly trust you."

Her voice brought tears to his eyes; her confidence steeled him.

"I've been a coward, and I shall always be a coward, dear; and . . ." He could not proceed. Instead, he kissed her cheek, and slowly Priscilla moved her head so that their lips might meet a second time. "You'll make me brave," he whispered. "Perhaps you'll make me brave."

But to be brave was now in his mind something different from what it had been. To be brave had been until now to endure, to bear whatever pain life might send, whatever sacrifice of self the exigencies of his care

for others might demand. In its newer reading to be brave meant to carry the difficulties of the world by assault; it meant not an accommodation, but a definite victory against odds. Was he strong enough? Could he do it?

"You are already brave," said Priscilla. "Oh, Stephen . . . you're already brave."

They presently came in sight of Mrs. Evandine and David, who were with great care examining an evening plant of luxurious scent. Neither Mrs. Evandine nor David made any sign that they had been waiting for their companions; but Mrs. Evandine knew from Priscilla's voice that there had been an explanation between the lovers, and she could not help trembling a little with excitement and sudden dread.

CHAPTER IV: CONSIDERATIONS

i

THE next day dawned as fair as its immediate predecessors, and the house at Totteridge squarely met the sun upon its brown, weather-stained side. A great triangle of the lawn was sliced into a soft, warm morning shade. A gardener was working within sight of the house; and Romeo was cleaning himself in the sun, with his large ears working hither and thither as if they were the ears which a horse so comically pricks and moves to every noticeable sound. Birds sang in the trees or hopped and fluttered impudently near Romeo, who sometimes left off cleaning himself, with a leg still extended, in order to utter a quivering noiseless miaw of desire at the shameless intruders. Within the house, work proceeded with a swift bustle, and the cheerful voices of the servants rose occasionally from the kitchen or the bedrooms. Mr. Evandine gently ambled about the garden, speaking to himself from time to time in his dry little voice, which had the air of being ejected from his person through a very small and slightly imperfect opening in his head. He would say "Yiss" and "Rilly" (for "yes" and "really"), and his pronunciation of "oh" was as if he should say "er" and "oo"; only in giving such a rough transcript one omits to indicate all the other subtle vowel sounds which may appear in so simple an exclamation. There was something a little pinched and fastidious about his whole manner of speech; but not about his bearing, which was entirely pleasant and unruffled. He was unusually ignorant of flowers, and his acquaintance with the contents of his own flower garden was so slight as to

bring horror into the hearts of his two gardeners. He would awaken one day to the presence of some new flower in one of the beds. "Er, whawt's this, Minch?" he would say; and Minch would patiently answer, "That's sweet-William, sir," or "Lupin, sir," or even "Snapdragon, sir —hantirrhinum"; to which Mr. Evandine would pleasantly respond "Rilly!" and forget all about the matter with a smiling vacancy that made the gardener think him a most absent-minded gentleman. But all the same Mr. Evandine was not entirely absent-minded; and it may have occurred to Romeo that his master was really rather shy and still did not know quite how to converse with his staff.

As Mr. Evandine wandered about the garden—thinking, possibly, of Mr. Vanamure's love of fine literature —his wife was talking with her housekeeper, and settling the day's menu. His daughter, with a pair of gardening gloves upon her slender hands, was upon the point of joining him and proceeding to her own garden. His son, of course, was already at the office, opening his letters and very rapidly answering them with the aid of an expert stenographer who could have typed his answers in three different languages if she had been equally expert at reading her shorthand notes. The entire Evandine family was lightly engaged, happy in gentle activities. . . . And the warm sun slowly grew warmer, and the deep blue sky seemed to grow deeper, and the glimpses of it through the sweet green leaves of all the surrounding trees became more ravishing, and the flowers proudly lifted their heads to the sun, and the murmur and subdued chanting rustle of garden life seemed to make the air quiver with the warmth and whisper and occupation of a summer morning, as though every activity was but one activity, an unceasing process in the spinning of that eternal web of significant life. It was another of those lovely days when voices seem

sweetly to echo in the clear air, when the sound of a spade striking a stone becomes a mellow chink exquisite to the ear, when the birds are happy but less boisterous than they are in the spring, and when, indeed, every sound ripples gently into the general harmony and makes human beings feel that happiness is the normal note of every kind of life.

Mr. Evandine was very well aware of the soothing effect of the garden upon his own nerves. He always recommended a short dawdle among the flowers and fruit and vegetables as a cure for any slight ailment. And in his own case an apple a day (which is rhymingly supposed to keep the doctor away) was only part of the regimen by which he cultivated perfect health, charity, and ease of spirit. He chafed at nothing. He had of course nothing to make him chafe; for his physical comfort was great, his taste and ambition were alike realized, his wife was perfect, his children quite delightful friends even for their parents, and his circle of attractive acquaintances large and pleasant. Mr. Evandine had nothing in life to wish for. He was a happy man.

ii

Nothing had so far arisen to disturb the tranquillity of his home. Its occupants were not selfish people, or vulgar people, or restless or stifling or moribund. Having realized their function in life, which was to enjoy the treasure to which they had equably been born, they had the candour and the intelligence to exert themselves accordingly. Freedom from earthly anxieties, so far from making them stupid, left the Evandines free to see things more clearly than many people are able to do. Mr. Evandine saw things least clearly, because he had his books to think about all day; and the man who thinks about books all day, for any other reason than that he

is employed to do it, is wantonly missing much of what goes on around him. But Mr. Evandine was not destroyed, for he was not a bookworm, and was easily discovered by bookworms to be a man of facile attainments. He would write a delicious essay, upon which he would spend perhaps a refined and delicate month of loving care, and would ravish the taste of the epicures. He would write about very "little" subjects (his lovers spoke about his exquisite "littleness"), such as his sensations in recalling early sports with magic-lantern slides, or his first reading of *Paradise Lost;* and he also wrote charming essays upon *Don Quixote* and Mrs. Behn and *The Gull's Hornbook* and *Mrs. Leicester's School,* in which essays he would with great appositeness quote the really good and amusing things from *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland.* But then he had another species of composition. He wrote long, and very finished, biographical studies of men who have not yet been overworked as subjects for literary disquisition. Besides five or six volumes of essays and belles-lettres he had produced books on Dr. Burney, Crabb Robinson, Thomas Dekker, and Leigh Hunt. The catholic taste, the fastidious execution, the smiling judgment of Mr. Evandine were all well known. The books were somehow there: they could not be escaped: in the London Library catalogue one saw "Robinson, Henry Crabb . . . *see* EVANDINE, CEDRIC [STALCETT], H. C. R.: a Biographical Study," for example, as the *only* book. Mr. Evandine almost invariably wrote the *only* book. Yet there was nothing threadbare, nothing in the least mean or calculated about these books. Mr. Evandine, in his reading, was struck by the fact that such a man had not been dealt with. What more natural than that he should himself essay to fill the void? Thus it was that he was always gracefully doing the unexpected thing in the expected way: if the "way" had been unexpected as well as the subject

he would have been less popular. If he had been always doing something different differently a feeling of uncertainty would have arisen. He would have seemed one of those brilliant fluttering men through whose work runs no safe note to which critics can honourably turn for comment. Instead, these books bore always the stamp of his easy, kind, good breeding; it was a pleasure to read them and to praise them. Mr. Evandine never grew more profound; but he was always polished and entertaining, and for those qualities, in spite of such fierce critics as Stephen Moore, we shall contrive to be gently grateful as long as literature is our mistress and not our ardent wayward friend.

iii

Mr. Evandine saw Priscilla the moment she left the house. So did Romeo, who dropped all feet to the ground and sailed towards her with his tail flourishing in the air. Priscilla wore a large blue pinafore, and a shady hat, and she carried a basket in which she intended to put any faded flowers or obstreperous grass-blades that she might find in that particular garden whose welfare she tended. As she came towards him Mr. Evandine smiled unconsciously, as most people would have done, from a feeling of pleasure.

"Priscilla," he said, as soon as she was within hearing, "I've been looking for five minutes at this flower; and Minch kindly told me the name of it; but the name seems to have gone out of my mind again. I particularly want to remember it because it is a colour one can refer to."

"Well, father," Priscilla said, frankly. "I should *say* it was a violet viola; but I'm not sure that you'd call it violet."

"Violet, of course!" cried Mr. Evandine, suavely covering his chagrin. "That delicate colour. It's not quite a violet . . . eh, eh?"

"Of course there are different shades: all those secondary colours are very elastic, aren't they . . .?"

"Yiss, yiss," hastily said Mr. Evandine. "Minch was telling me——"

"He's not altogether reliable, father. Sometimes he's carried away. His enthusiasm——"

"Minch, my dear, is one of those men with simple natures who retain the child's love of untruth. He actually doesn't realize that he's lying."

"So long as you're not taken in!" laughed Priscilla. "I'm afraid you sometimes are, you know. I don't want to make you distrust him."

Mr. Evandine frowned idly at her irreverence.

"You seem especially cheerful this morning, my dear," he ventured.

Priscilla's face instantly grew grave.

"Do I, father?" she asked, soberly.

"But you look . . . a little white." He scrutinized her sharply, as he sometimes was able to do when his thoughts were not otherwise engaged. "Don't tire yourself in your garden."

"As if a little weeding would hurt!" she indignantly said. "Come along, Romie."

Romeo followed, stopping to throw a passing lick at the middle of his back, where he sometimes had a slight irritation which was known to the Evandines as "young Harry" because it seemed such a persistent annoyance in Romeo's otherwise enjoyable life. The name had arisen because David, observing Romeo's gesture of impatience, had said, "He hath a devil . . . but only a little one."

But when Priscilla, thus as it were discarding her father, reached the little garden she fell dull and silent. When Romeo began once more to clean himself she stood half-leaning upon a spade, and could not help sighing. The short night was over, the night so much of which she had spent with quickening colour and shining eyes

recalling every moment of Stephen's presence; and a reaction of doubt had set in. She could hardly believe that their talk had been real. It seemed to her more like a dream. She had the same feeling that dreams give, that one has somehow said things one couldn't in waking moments have said, and yet that the things said have been in some way inexpressible—that the words have been framed, but no more. There was so much that had been left to the future; so much that had still to be made clear. Did Stephen understand? At the thought of Stephen the colour again crept into her cheeks, and the light into her eyes. With another sigh she put her spade down and bent to take up a swaying weed that had sprung up beside her handsomest rose—the rose from which three years before Stephen had gathered a bunch of blooms for her waist . . . and the blooms of which she had thrown down in her later passionate anger. She could never forgive herself that.

And Stephen had been right in their quarrel.

Every word that he had then used had been proved true. Ivy, the friend against whom he had warned her, had quickly illustrated the truth of Stephen's reproach. Priscilla shivered as she remembered. And he had stayed away—not because of their quarrel, but because he had too surely seen that his own unusual heat had arisen from a more powerful emotion. If he had continued to stay away? She had supposed that hearts broke; but hers had not broken. Nobody had seen that she was in love. Even her mother had not seen. She had not cried or moaned or shrunk from others. She had continued to behave as she had always done. But that, perhaps, was not from any conscious impulse. It must surely have been because she had not understood. "I shouldn't think that real love ever did altogether die," thought Priscilla. "I should think it dies down and stays, and sometimes gets diverted into other things. But it couldn't be

wasted." She was trying to think that she had learned a great deal from a love that had nourished her nature—trying to think that she was wiser than she would otherwise have been. Unconsciously she was holding the weed which she had plucked, and was looking at it with a half-reluctant smile, her fair hair and the big garden hat protecting her face from the sun and deepening her grave expression in the faint shadow.

So Priscilla stood when Mrs. Evandine came along the path.

iv

"Has father remembered the colour of the viola?" asked Priscilla of her mother.

"He was more concerned with your colour," said Mrs. Evandine. "It isn't very rosy."

"I slept badly." Priscilla quite frankly admitted the implication.

"But you're quite happy?"

"Yes. Quite happy. But I want to ask you about some things, mother." She saw her mother look anxious. In her sensitive mood it chilled her. "Not now, but later," she hurriedly concluded.

"What things, dear?" asked Mrs. Evandine gently aware of Priscilla's tiniest recoil and bent upon showing only her love and sympathy. For a moment Priscilla did not reply. The colour came into her face and she breathed quickly, as though her heart was painfully beating.

"Mother," she said impulsively, "why is Stephen so very poor?"

The blow had certainly come: it was Mrs. Evandine's part now to colour faintly.

"I suppose because he has to support his family, dear. I wish I knew more."

"You know we speak of the Clodds as poor. They say,

'Of course we're very poor: we shan't be able to go abroad this year.' But Stephen's poverty is not like that. It's something far more, isn't it?"

"No, dear. It's not like that," agreed her mother.

"He said he couldn't bear to think of my . . . He spoke of 'starving,' mother. Isn't that, with him, rather ridiculous? It isn't as though he were stupid. I wish I knew how little one could live on?"

"You've had such an easy life, Priscilla. And so, I'm afraid, have I. I don't think . . ." Mrs. Evandine checked herself. "Stephen will tell us."

Priscilla looked gratefully at her mother for that confidence.

"I'm so afraid he won't *let* me marry him," she said. Then: "I'm so afraid he finds it easier to—to repress himself. He'd rather suffer in silence. Mother, it's horrible; but I could only influence him by being selfish, and saying how much I should suffer."

Mrs. Evandine was not shocked; but Priscilla's very quiet little voice hurt her.

"And you said that?" she asked, in a curious silence.

"I *had* suffered. And I'm ready to suffer. But . . . it's not right to suffer if you can help it, do you think, mother? Stephen hasn't told me anything. I'm only wondering and wondering. But if he loves me, as I know he does; and if I love him, as I know I do . . . can anything prevent our being married? He speaks as though I were afraid of work, when I'd so proudly work for him—as though I should in some way be degraded."

"My dear," said Mrs. Evandine, just a little horrified, "I think it would be more of a strain than you imagine. And, dear," she went on, very swiftly, "Stephen isn't a man who would let us help him. You see that. I don't want to seem to make objections—I only want you to be happy, and Stephen to be happy. But if Stephen wants to marry you he'll manage to do so, and I think we'd

better let him explain to us what his situation is. There is his father to think of, and the younger ones——"

"I wish I could know Dorothy," broke in Priscilla.

"Is that his sister? I asked him to bring her to see us."

"Do you think I did wrong, mother?"

"I don't quite know what you did, dear. No, I don't think you did wrong. I like Stephen, and admire him."

"But you're afraid, in some way."

Mrs. Evandine looked distressed. Her face, as pretty and as flushed almost as her daughter's, grew a little pinker, and she stood as if confused. It was impossible for Priscilla to bear such distress, and she put her arm round her mother's shoulders.

"As if I were a child," Mrs. Evandine protested. "Let me just tell you. I *am* afraid; but it is only because you are my little girl. I didn't dream of this till the other night; and now I can't be sure whether I'm glad or sorry. It's a tremendous risk. I *think* there are some reasons against it; but there generally are some reasons."

"The reason *for* it is that we love each other," Priscilla urgently said.

"That's the best reason of all," her mother admitted. "Well, we'll see what Stephen says. I quite agree with you, dear, in relying on him. But you see, it's the first time the question has arisen. There hasn't, I mean, ever been anybody else."

"No," said Priscilla, with quite another meaning; "there has never been anybody else."

"We won't say any more now."

"No, mother. Though I wish you were altogether on my side."

Mrs. Evandine could not help laughing, and kissing her daughter with a little fierceness of motherly affection.

"It's rather funny to think, isn't it, that the other side is Stephen!" she murmured with the faintest touch of

malice in her voice. But when Priscilla's eyes darkened at that she quickly relented. "Oh, but I'm really all on your side, dear. I'm simply wanting to be courteous and give the other side a hearing."

Priscilla was certainly not going to cry; although her mother's tremulous laughter gave her a strained feeling in her throat as if tears were threatening. She picked up her spade.

"I'm going to dig," she said defiantly.

Mrs. Evandine wavered a moment, looking down at her daughter. Priscilla was so slight and so lovely that it seemed impossible to think of her as soiled or jaded by hard work; and yet that was the picture that, momentarily, Mrs. Evandine saw in imagination. Neither of them could have borne that. The other picture, from which, motherlike, she had earlier revolted, was one of an entirely different character. It was a picture that had involved no material sacrifice, that seemed in fact to hold no least hint of unpleasantness; yet it was one against which Mrs. Evandine's imagination had for some reason strongly rebelled. Without moving, she said, very distinctly:

"I wonder what Hilary would think of this."

Priscilla started, and stood erect, looking at her mother with something like horror in her eyes. She had not once thought of Hilary.

V

"I'm sure they dislike each other," Priscilla said, leaning on the spade.

"You can't altogether wonder: men are very quick to feel rivalry—nearly as quick as women."

"Are women so quick? Are they very jealous?"

"I think they are. You must remember it shows itself in very different ways. Jealousy is very much involved with personal vanity; and vanity is a profound study."

Priscilla laughed at her mother's dry oracular manner.

"But Hilary has never . . ." she began. Then, checking what she felt was perhaps an unworthy pretence of not understanding Hilary's feeling, Priscilla rather defiantly said: "David likes Stephen."

"Because he's interested in him."

"Oh, much more than that," persisted Priscilla. "He really likes him."

Mrs. Evandine mused for a moment.

"Yes, I think so. Well, I'm going indoors, dear. You must keep very cheerful, and not think about Hilary or David or—— I wish Romeo wouldn't play with sun-beetles. It's not a nice trait."

With such an irrelevancy on her lips Mrs. Evandine lifted Romeo away from a beetle, helped the beetle into security with the aid of a trowel, and disappeared from her daughter's view.

Left alone, Priscilla began fiercely to dig until she panted from the exertion in this hot sunshine. Only then, realizing that her labour was entirely useless, did she desist. Her mother's sympathetic warning had only confirmed her own uncomfortable thoughts, while it had in no way affected her real desire or her real resolve. To Priscilla everything now depended upon Stephen's action. She did indeed trust him; but uncontrollably she wished to be at hand when he was making up his mind, so that she could prompt him in accordance with her own inclination. Oh dear, if only she knew!

"How ridiculous it is," she said, coming back to her old starting-point, "to have misgivings. Yes; but for him they're *not* misgivings. But I wonder if . . ." Her cheeks flamed and flamed until the blood seemed to hurt her. "I do hope he doesn't think me . . . horrible. . . ."

For the rest of the day that was the dreadful doubt that poisoned her happiness.

vi

As Mrs. Evandine went back to the house she again met her husband, whose arm she took as they fell into step together.

"I was very glad to see Moore last night," he observed. "He's a very intelligent fellow. But I'm . . . not sure . . . You see these young men are so absolute. David's the same. However, I must admit that Moore has knowledge. He knows more than David does."

"He's what you would call 'sound,' then?" Mrs. Evandine queried, not altogether mischievously.

"Too exacting. Sound. Yes, sound. I would almost say, brilliant as well."

"You think he has a future?" asked Mrs. Evandine.

"Certainly."

"He's rather savage, you must remember."

"My dear, if he specializes in savagery he'll certainly succeed. He'll be unpopular; but what of that? The stuff's there."

"You would be ready to back him?" asked Mrs. Evandine. Her husband looked puzzled.

"Why 'back'? And what does the word mean?"

She laughed at his fastidious distaste.

"It's no good pretending to be as ignorant as a judge!" she remonstrated. "I was wondering if you would think it possible to help him to make a reputation. You confirm my impression that he has unusual ability. I wanted to know whether you are sure enough of that to interest yourself in his future."

"What do you want me to do?"

Mr. Evandine's manner, it has been suggested, was capable of being ruffled into irritability; but never with his wife, for whom he had a suitable respect. Therefore his tone in asking the question was one of intimate inquiry.

"Well, Cedric: Stephen Moore is a young man of no means, no family, no education, and without any of that 'manner' that makes for success. You admit that?"

"Quite."

"Very well. This young man has brains. He must be enabled to use them."

"Quite."

"And we must help him."

Mr. and Mrs. Evandine looked at each other. One might very quickly have counted three while that glance was exchanged and until Mr. Evandine realized without further explanation what was in his wife's mind and what was dimly in prospect.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" he said in his rather mincing voice. "Rilly!" It was a great blow to him. For a moment he nervously fidgeted, and clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "But . . . but would you countenance . . .? Rilly, rilly . . . What is Prissy thinking about?"

He was held by his wife's clear eye, from which he could not escape. To see her so little perturbed soothed him very much.

"Of course, my dear, if you think . . ." he feebly said.

One wonders how Priscilla would have liked to hear this. Particularly one wonders how Stephen Moore would have liked the way in which his difficulties were being thus innocently, sympathetically, but perhaps a little undesirably discussed. But Stephen was in sufficient distress with his own affairs, which had suddenly taken a new and most unwelcome turn.

CHAPTER V: AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

i

AFTERWARDS, Stephen could never remember any details of his journey home on that fateful Sunday night. It was as though he were blind, as though he had been stunned at the reversal of all his plans, so deliberately made, and now so suddenly converted into the merest dusty inhuman denial of human impulse. The road, as he walked quickly along it, was so piercingly white with the moon's colourless lustre that the trees seemed black against the violet sky. The silence of the lovely evening was intense. There were no other persons in all this long clear avenue, streaming with the quiet moonlight. . . . He could not be insensible to the beauty by which he was surrounded, but he was unconscious of it, for his heart was throbbing and his mouth and lips were dry with excitement. He was not happy, as other lovers are: he was excited, intoxicated with the new and strange adventure to which he was committed: but happiness was far from his mood. Yet he was not afraid.

Over and over again, once the first marvel had departed, he was astounded at Priscilla's reality. He had thought of her as lovely, as exquisite; as something inconceivably remote from his possession. But now that he had held her in his arms, now that he could intensely re-imagine that contact, her hands raised upon his breast, her soft cheek, her softer lips and hair, pressed by his own, Priscilla was transformed in his memory. He was conscious of triumph, of sheer triumph. For this moment nothing else mattered. All that he had stumbled to say

about his poorness—every attempt that he had made to reduce their love to the plane of his daily preoccupations —had been, it appeared, wholly irrelevant; for a new and intenser reality had touched him. Priscilla's kisses were no longer dreams—the mockery of eternal temptation; they were no longer sacred emblems, sealing confession and promise; he passionately desired to kiss Priscilla again and again because she was the woman he loved, and for no other reason whatever.

He came abreast of the little church with its white wooden paling, and walked swiftly onward in the steely shadow of the tall trees beyond the church, and past the dull ponds at the farther side of the road where a long broad avenue of grass lay at right angles to the highway. He breasted the hill, and saw the trams flash by along the Great North Road, and his pace grew slower at the return to ordinary life. The sight of the trams made him long to go back to Priscilla, to give a thousand explanations that had occurred to his eagerly seeking mind as he walked. He wanted in some way to prostrate himself before her. He felt that he would have given anything to be able once more to assure her of his love and his intrepid resolve. When he remembered that she had said she could not bear him to be so humble, he felt sick with shame; for the humility had been hers, as he now instinctively saw, in spite of all the fumbling efforts of his tedious vanity.

The tramcar journey through the lighted streets, with men talking and women laughing and one or two children peevish through sleepiness, seemed to pass in a moment. He could hear, but he did not notice, the men saying, "Oo yes, they *made* 'im. I ses to 'im, 'Well, George, I ses; it's all very well for you to talk like that, I ses; but it stands to common sense!' Told 'im off, you see. Well, he didn't like *that*. . . ." Nor the women saying, "You ought to've seen 'er . . . 'Air 'angin' down . . . face all

dirty. Three o'clock in the afternoon. Oo, she's *awful!*" Ordinarily he would have heard these things and thought about them, recognizing the quite universal habit of expository narrative and detraction; only now, when his mind was distraught, he gave no heed, but sat silently in the darkness, watching with sightless eyes the black crowds of promenaders upon the pavements below.

At last the tram—the one going from Highgate almost to the heart of the City—reached Highbury; and he joined the pedestrians. Only then did he become definitely aware of his surroundings, of the tall shuttered shops of the Upper Street; and the respectable crescent separated from the road by dismal railings and a patch of grass and its own gravel sweep; and the big grey church that stood so clear of all the neighbouring houses; and the dull streets joining the Upper Street; and the clang-clang-clanging tramcars that flew by in a sudden hurry. He sighed impatiently as he caught sight of the moon benevolently dreaming above all these shabby streets and this noisy traffic and this unceasing, talking sweep of the men and women, and girls and boys, who were wandering up and down the wide thoroughfare. How different was this scene from the one so recently stamped upon his memory and his imagination. How different was Priscilla's home from his. A slow creeping feeling of paralysis threatened him at the recognition of facts so unwelcome. To come from Priscilla to this! His heart sank. How could he ever bridge the distance that divided them? If love were all!

Ah . . . They will take us,
Bleed us, break us,
Shackle and smother,
And leave us stark!
They call it living,
Clutching and striving . . .

For an instant *that* agony, the thought that love might indeed be dishonoured in the base turmoil of mere existence, overcame him. Even amid the crowd, lost in the solitude of many passengers, Stephen was conscious of panic fear of that disaster. It was the consequence only of his mood, so recently among the stars, so abruptly brought down among the houses and the pressing conflicting streams of people, and the shabby turnings and the long weary memory of his years of sacrifice in a battle so stern and so remorseless. Thoughts that are discouraging, however inevitable may be their truth, cannot long dominate the mind of a brave man; and Stephen's distrustful mood passed in a moment. It was but a momentary fit of hopelessness. But Stephen had known the reality of his lonely fight with necessity. He knew how silently hunger forces its opponents by gradual degrees of exhaustion first to their knees and then to the slow squalid defeat which is acceptance of death that is worse than death. He was not a coward; but he could not idly pretend that there was no danger. He had simply been reminded of its imminence, and of his own imperfect weapons of defence. Well, he must gird himself anew, with fresh resolution!

At his own door Stephen mechanically drew forth the key, entered, and made his way up the stairs. It was only when he had passed the first floor that he became aware that there were voices above, raised to quite audible heights of merriment. Who could be there? He could think of no possible visitors upon this Sunday evening. He tried for an instant, pausing upon the staircase, to distinguish the tones, but unavailingly; and with a sense that laughter this evening would be unbearable he opened the door of the sitting-room.

His entrance seemed to check the high spirits of Roy and his friend Tom Harrington, who were standing by the fireplace with cigarettes between their fingers, lolling

against the mantelpiece. It seemed to check some anecdote which was being related by the old man, who, dressed in his distinguished suit of blue serge, with his fine spotted bow tie and spotted handkerchief in the breast-pocket, lay back in a wicker chair by the window, his mouth stretched wide in a white streak of smilingness. Stephen's quick eye, quite restored to its normal activities of relentless observation, took this all in immediately. He saw Tom Harrington's face less frank than it had been a few weeks earlier, he saw that Roy did not look up with any friendliness as he came in, but that on the contrary he looked as though he were conscious of some repressive influence. There was momentary constraint, as usual, even in the old man's manner, for the old man knew, as well as Roy, the penetrating lengths to which Stephen's glance could go.

But these three figures were not the only ones in the room, and it was the last one of all that made Stephen's heart jump. For a moment he could not believe his first impression true; then every faintest tinge of colour left his face, which seemed to sink in until his cheek-bones became startlingly prominent. The lamplight, thrown imperfectly over the lower half of the room, saved his change of bearing from disclosure, and his self-control was so good that it did not even here betray him. For, seated beside Dorothy on the old-fashioned horsehair sofa, which was one of the few things remaining in the family that had belonged to the old man's own furnishing days, was Minnie Bayley.

ii

With a nod to Tom Harrington, Stephen went straight to the remaining visitor and held out his hand. Once the shock of recognition was over he had become curiously cool.

"This is very unexpected," he said. "How are you?"

". . . the story . . . Mahomet and the mountain . . ." She could hardly speak, her teeth were so disposed to chatter. Her voice waved about among uncertain tones, so remarkably, in spite of her soft speech and the renewed conversation of the old man with the two boys, that even Dorothy noticed the strong emotion under which Minnie laboured. The hand that Stephen took trembled in his grasp; but Minnie's smile never varied, and her eyes were never still for a moment. "You don't come to see me . . ." she went on. "I wondered . . . if you were ill. It's been quite a jolly party. . . . These three *boys!*" Her little laugh quivered out and was as quickly checked, as if by an effort of determination.

Stephen brought a chair and sat near, never meeting her eyes, but always looking at the two hands so tightly clasped in her lap. They were long white hands, very thin; and her wrists were thin and slightly wasted. As her hands moved she showed that they too had hollows in them, and that the bones projected sharply at the knuckles when the fingers were bent. Stephen could not raise his eyes to her face, and in a moment she began nervously to move her wedding-ring up and down the finger upon which it rested.

"Stephen . . . just fancy! Mrs. Bayley came the moment you had gone!" said Dorothy impetuously. "But she's been very nice about it, and hasn't shown she minded a bit!"

"That was very kind," Stephen murmured. "What a pity!" In spite of his feeling of imposed coolness, he did not know what he said.

"He's only saying that," Minnie explained. "He means 'what a good job!'" She again laughed that little staccato giggling laugh.

"That's not true," Dorothy protested stoutly. "Stephen always means what he says."

"Not to a woman," said Minnie. "Nor what he does."

For one instant she had made him look at her; but the effort had cost almost too much, and Minnie's fingers broke involuntarily from their tight clasp, so that her handkerchief was knocked to the floor. It was inevitable that as she took it again from Stephen their hands should meet.

"Stephen—excuse me—" Dorothy inclined her head to the table. "Anything to eat? You've had something? I thought you must have."

"Have you had a good time?" asked Minnie.

"What did you say?"

"Where you've been . . . Have you . . . Oh, *don't look so. . . .*" The last words were in the lowest possible whisper, meant only for Stephen's ear. His eyes closed for a moment, as if he were forcing himself to take the scene exactly as he found it.

"Yes . . . excellent. Thank you: I had . . ."

"He's enjoyed it so much that he's . . . speechless with joy," cried Dorothy. "And we've been having a good time, too, haven't we, Mrs. Bayley?"

"Oh, splendid!" Again she laughed, and looked imploringly at Stephen, sitting beside Dorothy like a schoolgirl, and looking, in her present pallor, much prettier than usual.

"You come here, Stephen," Dorothy said abruptly, moving from the sofa. "I'm going to make some more lemonade. And you can talk to Mrs. Bayley."

Slowly and awkwardly Stephen took his place by Minnie's side. She was beautifully dressed in a very light grey silk costume, cut low at the neck; and her mouse-coloured hair was brushed up away from her small and delicately formed ears. She was perhaps thirty, obviously very nervous. Her eyes, which were of a dark brown, were rather full, but warm and timid, and she used them too much in speaking, as she did her lips. As

Stephen sat down she turned more directly towards him, instead of turning only her head, as she had done to Dorothy.

"I wrote to you," she whispered. "I *had* to write . . ."

"When?" Stephen's inquiry was one of astonishment.

"A fortnight ago. Didn't you get it?"

"Did you send it here?" He was now questioning sharply.

"Yes. It didn't matter. I only asked you to come . . . Stephen, I can't . . . You *must* come and see me sometimes. . . ." Her voice was hardly above a whisper: unknowingly she had approached her face nearer to his, so that Stephen saw her faint colour rising.

"I've seen no letter at all. You must tell me what you said."

"Only 'I want to see you so badly' . . . Something like '*Do* come.'" Minnie for a moment looked frightened: she blanched. "What is it? Why are you looking like that?"

Stephen had noticed that the murmur of voices had stopped for a second. He looked quickly up, to meet the old man's wide fixed smile of indulgent malice directed at him from the wicker chair by the open window.

iii

In ancient days the old man had been a lithographic draughtsman, and had made a good deal of money. He was employed in the litho department of a big printing firm, and at one time had become head of the department. Even in his days of prosperity, however, he belonged to what is often affectionately called "the old school," which means a class of men devoted to the study of the bottle and the tankard. As he had a very sweet tenor voice, he was in great demand as a singer upon occasions when

his fellow-members of the old school gathered together for purposes of hilarity. The old man had shared their sports, had led them, had fought with prowess, loved and philandered with flattering unerringness; and he had bettered with his peers upon every race in the calendar. Handsome, ruthless, confident, he had been a favorite; all were his friends and his companions. Spirits and horses, Bohemian club evenings and bar-palaverings, had all combined to work upon his nerve. His hand and eye kept wonderfully steady, and it became a legend that he never handled the brush as surely as when he was drunk. It became a boast with him. But he could eat no breakfasts; his need grew for morning stimulants; by noon he was often, with little trips "over to the corner," rather woolly and "muzzy" and vague in his speech. His hand and eye lost, not steadiness but precision. His work became weaker and more elaborate and deficient in "quality." He went from one firm to another. It was a pity; the man was a good man, his employers knew; but it could not go on. Still the old man's cronies boisterously hailed him. "Here's old Moore!" they would cry with welcoming laughter. "How are you, Jack, old boy?" To each other, they said: "D'you know him? Charming fellow. . . . Got his almanac in his pocket? . . . No, but he's got a mighty thirst on him. . . . What's going to win the Cesarewitch, Moore? . . . Here, Moore, what'ller have? . . . No, you must have it with me. Now boys . . ."

So Mrs. Moore grew poorer, and so the children went without clothing and without food; until the old man began to take even the money his wife earned. But she never thought of leaving him, until the day of her death came, because she loved him still, and because the kindness of his manner to her, as to everybody else, was unfailing. Drunk or sober, the old man never lost the sweetness of his tongue. It was long since he had worked

at his craft, though he sometimes spoke of "work"; and what money he earned for himself was earned by the singing of the sweet old tenor ballads in a voice that was even now almost beautiful and always very readily pathetic. He also had some reputation of knowing the ropes as a picker-up of cheap genuine antiques; and from these commissions he no doubt amassed a proportion of legitimate booty for his own trouble. Stephen sometimes wondered if the old man's steadily diminishing furniture had been sold as antique merely because it was dilapidated. The money the old man made was always spent in jovial company, as was most of the old man's time; and to his family, recognizing their very questioning attitude towards him, the old man grew noticeably cooler. He had grown also more secretive, as most of those who are good fellows and charming fellows incline to do. He never told them anything about himself excepting mysteriously to hint at important appointments at the Salisbury or at Anderton's in Fleet Street; but went his way, using the home as an hotel, borrowing from its staff, and never paying his bill. It was the life of a butterfly, filled with a gorgeous insubstantial unreality.

There was feud between Stephen and the old man. The old man, having been everywhere loved and approved all his life by his inferiors, could not tolerate the new agnosticism, the scepticism, the corrosion which he found in Stephen's attitude of inelastic rectitude. Could he be blamed for preferring the easy virtues of the brighter path? Not his notion of life to play the puritan, to do things because it was right or necessary that they should be done. "Let me play the Fool," said the old man. "With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come!"—though he was very careful by rest and by the avoidance of all troublesome incidents to preserve his youthful appearance. Always smartly dressed, smartly carried,

and irrepressibly benign, the old man could have given to no one but an expert in such recondite matters the clue to his secret. His was the lighter burden only. And while the old man had thought only of the day and the splendour of the seizable moment, Stephen's lot in that family had been always to think of the morrow. In a family there must always be one to do that; and if the two men jarred upon each other may it not have been that the difference between them was one not only of temperament but also of office?

That there was hostility between them, undeclared, but for that very reason the more intense and the more potent, might have been seen in that exchanged glance. Stephen's was sombre, resentful, almost scathing in its cold suspicion; the old man's was complacent and malicious and —in a strange way that always rankled with Stephen—at the same time subtly indulgent. The old man, sitting as he did by the open window, had upon one side of his face the reflected light of the clear evening, and upon the other the lamp's diffused beam. His eyes were in shadow. Stephen, sitting with Minnie Bayley upon the sofa, was more directly in the light of the room, and his attitude towards Minnie was more directly to be observed. Nobody, sitting where the old man was, could fail to notice the suggestion of intimacy conveyed by her increased nearness to Stephen, or by his own embarrassed but dominating manner as he inclined his head nearer to her moving lips and pathetic eyes.

It was that intimacy which, secure in his distant seat, the old man seemed with such malignant tranquillity to be enjoying, his smile clearly to be seen, but on no account to be read; while the boys still talked and laughed by the fireplace and Dorothy brought in the lemonade. Stephen's eyes dropped, and he breathed deeply. Very well: that was another difficulty, as this was. He did not think now of Priscilla: he was thinking much more clearly than it

was yet possible to do of her. He was trying to push away all crowding confusions and to get back to that prime reality which was his own deliberate, unhesitating will. To be in tangible difficulty stiffened him.

iv

"Dorothy said you had gone to Totteridge, my dear Stephen," said the old man, with the mild inflexion of one timidly interested in his son's welfare. Stephen, recognizing the stunt, scowled, but made no response.

"So you've been to Totteridge?" Minnie looked curious, wondering where he had been. "That's in the north, isn't it? Is it nice there?" Artlessly she put the question.

"Yes. Very nice."

"Nice people?" Minnie's face was half turned away.

"Yes. Very nice."

She gave a little laugh, and looked down at her hands.

"Put a penny in the slot and the figure—says 'very nice,'" she answered with an air of suppressed impatience. "I expect they're brainy people. Not like me."

Of that he took no notice, which distressed her.

"Whetstone very little changed, I suppose?" the old man suggested.

"Since I was there—yes. Were you thinking of longer ago?"

"I can remember it as all fields. Before the Finchleys spread." The old man, who had a smattering of antiquarian knowledge about London, could always remember the farther suburban districts as open land. He could remember a time when that long, shop-fronted thoroughfare was not, as it must now be, called Green Lanes in mockery, and when Clerkenwell and Islington, in which districts all his life had been lived, were the abodes of rich jewellers and craftsmen, not yet the muddy and dusty congestions which they now are.

"Once you're off the road at Whetstone it is still pretty open," remarked Stephen.

"Your friends got a nice house?" asked Minnie. "Oh —I know . . . *Don't* say it!" Again her quivering, breathless laugh was checked. But when she saw his brow slightly puckered her eyes became once more imploring. "I can't help it," she murmured very low. "I'd given you up . . . you're so late. I'm all silly."

"Secrets?" archly inquired the old man, opening his eyes and smiling as he came towards them. "I really must hear what is going on. My deafness . . . you know the consequences of advanced age. . . ."

"Get along with you! Advanced age!" protested Minnie. "You look younger than Stephen." The two boys also came nearer, and laughed at her speech. Stephen left her side, and stood against his father. "There's not much likeness between you two."

"We have one similarity," the old man said. "We're very fond of the ladies." He smiled down at her. "At least, when they're pretty and charming as well."

Stephen turned away, and Minnie also rose to her feet, looking at her wrist-watch.

"I must go."

"Allow me to see you part of the way," said the old man gallantly. She started.

"Oh, there's no need! I can get a tram to the door."

"I'll go with Mrs. Bayley," said Stephen curtly.

"No, no, my boy. That's my privilege," the old man insisted, with a pleasant and distinguished wave of his shapely hand. "My hat is here."

For a moment Minnie stood nonplussed, turning to Stephen as if in spite of her wish not to do so. The old man did not give way. It was clear that he would not relinquish his claim. There was no opportunity whatever for any speech between Minnie and Stephen before Minnie followed Dorothy from the room; and when she

returned with a smart grey hat which matched her costume perched daringly to one side of her head there was no time for more than a hurried word. She secured that only by having trouble with her long silken scarf.

"You *will?*" she murmured. "Any evening."

"Yes . . . this week." He took her hand and pressed it.

"Are you ready?" asked the old man, stepping forward with a courtly bow. "Stephen, poor fellow, has had a long journey. A walk will do me good. You ought to come more often, Mrs. Bayley. We miss you, really we do, since you moved away from us. Don't we, Stephen!"

They were gone. Stephen heard the slamming of the front door. What an age it seemed since he had seen Priscilla. He found that he was trembling slightly.

CHAPTER VI: STEPHEN ALONE

i

WHEN one enters the British Museum the reading-room lies straight ahead, shielded by folding doors and guarded by its own commissioners. Past the doors is a short passage, and then are more doors; after which one is in the great circular room with its high, domed roof and its rows of desks arranged like the spokes of a wheel for half of the floor-space. A warm stifling glow from the hot-water pipes stales the air quite early in the day, so that eyes are made to ache and heads to nod, and so that when one's attention strays the painted names of eminent authors placed just under the dome hold it with a sort of languorous fascination. The names, and in particular the omissions of other names, form a curious problem in the art of selection. It becomes quite clear that a hundred names were put into a hat and chosen at random from the hat until the available spaces were filled. But while it is easy to laugh at the names, to deplore the strange biscuit-coloured paint, to resent the superheated atmosphere, the British Museum reading-room does somehow stand to the Londoner as a holy of holies. Stephen Moore, sardonically listening to the horrid coughs of the congregation before wisdom, and fully aware of all inconveniences and oppressivenesses as they are illustrated in the conduct of official establishments, was as glad of the reading-room as was Wendy Darling of Peter Pan. When the clock chimed he sometimes was thrilled at its extraordinary sweetness; and when he benefited by the arrangements he was still capable of appreciating keenly the awful nearly human sagaciousness of those in charge. He would observe with

kindness the miserably imprisoned men in the middle of the room to whom he returned his books when he had finished with them. They represented to Stephen the official hostages to misfortune.

And Stephen, on the Monday morning after that Sunday whose events have been described, was punctually at his usual place, waiting to receive the books upon which his morning's work was to be based. He had been given a commission by a publisher for whom he worked to prepare material for a book on the River Fleet, which takes its rise among the hills of Hampstead and Highgate and continues to flow underground, all unknown and forgotten, until it reaches the Thames about Blackfriars Bridge. The work upon which he was engaged was purely mechanical, a matter of extracting and collating, and he would earn by hard absorption only a few pounds and get absolutely no advantage by the book's publication. But the details interested him. It was wonderful to him to think of this river, so lost to knowledge, flowing still as a sewer under the streets he so often trod in his evening wanderings about London. So, for a time, he was become an antiquary, very profoundly ignorant, dreading mistakes of proportion and even of fact, but nevertheless engaged upon a work that did arouse his attention and his resolve to achieve accuracy. He had come by the work in a curious way. A publisher for whom he had done some very meagrely paid research had been approached by a committee of three old gentlemen representing a small society. They wanted such a book prepared, to be published at their expense, with their names upon the title-page, and to be illustrated from old plans. Individually the three old gentlemen were almost wholly ignorant, as they had been each successful in a lowly trade quite unconnected with literature or research. But when they learned that the publisher could provide a trustworthy compiler the passion for literary renown

glowed in their hearts like patriotism. They would get this compiler dutifully to do the work; and they would reap the rewards. To them would stand the credit of rescuing the Fleet from oblivion. Stephen was to have thirty pounds for his scrupulous examinations and collations.

He found the river upon this Monday morning a godsend for just as long as it would hold his for ever flying attention. For Stephen had much to think upon and to settle in his own mind, and when clear decisions are to be taken and to be followed by decisive actions a state of nerves bordering upon neurasthenia is obviously one that gives little assistance. He was called upon to decide the immediate future not only of his own life but, in various degrees, of the lives of five other people. He had to make up his mind quite definitely; and after a wretchedly sleepless night he could not think. He had to settle what was to be done about Dorothy and about Roy. He had to settle what he must offer and promise Priscilla. And there was the old man. And Minnie Bayley. The old man was only a danger to peace of mind, to integrity of purse; he and Roy could both look after themselves *if only they would do so.* That was the difficulty with those two. The other three were women. All, after the manner, or the unfortunate necessity, of their sex, looked to him. And Stephen was not one of those men who, in an expressive figure, can cut the painter. To him life was complex, not simple; a thing full of involvements and counter-currents and reactions and interactions. He could not in any one of these three cases strike out simply for himself, for his own immediate impulse; for to each one of these women he represented at this moment, whatever might be the accidental quality which gave him so difficult a rôle, the central point or figure in their pathetically limited vision of life. He must not fail in any one case to carry through the respon-

sibility which he acknowledged. Yet Stephen may well have sighed for that simple passage to the realization of personal will which is trodden only in real life by the purely selfish and untroubled and in fiction by those who are marked out from the first to play the hero or ineffable juvenile lead. Neither of those parts was within the mimetic range of Stephen, who aspired only to the humbler impersonation of a minor character in the play of life.

ii

Stephen Moore was born in Islington in 1882; and at the time with which this story deals he was twenty-eight. His mother died when he was fifteen, when Dorothy was eight years old and when Roy was a little boy of five. She died worn out with work and anxiety, but without ever uttering a word of that gathering mistrust and even detestation of her husband which was hardly even then taking stealthily the place of her constancy. That is to say, she died before any explosion could precipitate her with sudden force into the least suspicion of the accumulating hatred which would have made her life unbearable. She died still loving her husband.

When Stephen was eight he fell down a flight of stone steps and broke his ankle; and delay in having the ankle set resulted in a permanent, but not a disfiguring, lameness. His schooling was interrupted; and the need for his constant attention to little Dolphy (as she called herself) and presently to the still smaller Roy kept him a great deal at home. The school-inspector's calls were evaded, or perhaps the man was a little awed by Mrs. Moore's refined speech and notably remaining beauty; for no pressure was brought to bear upon the Moores. Stephen would wander about, would run errands, would sometimes get a little money for helping a tradesman on Saturdays as an extra boy; and at last, when he was

thirteen, went out to work for himself. His father one evening was grumbling. "Everything to find," he said untruthfully; "and nobody to help me." "Who d'you want to help you?" asked Stephen, in a high clear voice. "You, if you could!" said his father. Secretly, to his mother, Stephen said: "I'm not going to stand that!" and secretly he answered advertisements and found a situation at six shillings a week. When he received the letter formally engaging him he left it out upon the table beside the supper which had been prepared for his father. "I'll let him see!" thought Stephen, trembling.

From that time Stephen worked during the day, and when he was sixteen he went two or three evenings a week to keep the books of a shopkeeper in Essex Road. On the evenings when he was not engaged in account-keeping he read at home—books that were borrowed from a small library set up beside a local chapel. He went on with this even after his mother died, when he changed his daily situation for one in which he received a higher wage; and his reading became a little wider, though it was always limited. One thing this limited reading taught him, and perhaps one thing only. If he knew little he knew that little thoroughly. He knew it almost word for word. And the reading of a single book led him to books of a kindred subject and a kindred place in time. He was not taught anything; he simply learned from his reading a great and deep love for literature (as for virtue) for its own sake. He read, that is, only what he loved to read; and that is why he learned from his reading, since if he tried to memorize knowledge of something he did not love he found that his overworked brain rejected such hammering. Stephen, with a chilled feeling, went back to his natural study.

Paler and thinner he grew, and his clothes were shabby and his boots leaky and broken, and his nature grew very shy and rather hard. He found himself cherishing bitter

resentments, and for his father a hatred that was dominated by his fear. If he had been alone he would have left his father; but he could not think of leaving the children to whom so assiduously he played the mother. They were his first thought; Dorothy his first love. Thinking as he did always of the children before anything else Stephen was certainly estranged from his father, and in some measure cut off from any friendship that he might have formed with others. He had no friends and knew no boys or young men of his own age and tastes. He became superficially misanthropic, by which it is intended to suggest that his speech was unenthusiastic, called cynical, and to many persons unpalatable. His heart remained kind; but his manner was brusque and too early mature. He became duller, as glass that is not polished becomes duller. But he continued always to think first of others.

So his life continued until one day he met Mr. Evandine on the road between Barnet and Elstree—a long, winding, hilly road of great interest which for five miles runs roughly east and west and joins two attractive northern suburbs of London. Mr. Evandine was cycling, and the day was warm; so that Stephen, noticing that the older man was very tired, helped him to push his bicycle up the hill. Mr. Evandine found his helper taciturn but agreeable, talked gently to him, quoted—inaccurately—four familiar lines of Shakespeare's about the merry heart, and received a rather prim emendation that set him privily laughing. He turned the conversation to books, was delighted to find Stephen intelligent, learned his name, discovered a distant relationship, and took the young man home to tea. For a time Mr. Evandine, who caused Stephen frequently to return, cherished the idea of "doing something" for him; but when he forgot this plan, and when Stephen quarrelled with Priscilla upon a matter which seemed at the moment vital, the acquaint-

anceship was abruptly broken off by the sensitive young man who somewhat relentlessly pursued truth and virtue at the expense of humour and happiness. Stephen, in fact, returned to his old guard over Dorothy and Roy, and was newly inspired to study other and more difficult subjects than he had yet attempted. That was the whole story, in brief, of Stephen's life up to the time of the meeting with Minnie Bayley, who, with her husband, occupied the floor below the Moores at number 52 Slapperton Street. The story of his friendship with Minnie is a part of this tale, and will appear in its due course.

iii

So Stephen continued to sit at his desk in the reading-room, the hot engrossing atmosphere of the room stealing upon him like sleep, and his thoughts driving hither and thither among ways and means and among needs and aspirations as if there were no safe love to which they might exultingly return from every excursion. In vain did he concentrate upon printed sentences. They seemed to dissolve as his mind slid off away from their meaning; and from coherent phrases they sank into swimming collections of ridiculous letters. If one actually looks long enough at a word it becomes at length entirely unconvincing, as if there could never have been such a word, so nonsensical a concatenation of letters. Stephen found his work thus impossible, so long as his mind was dominated by the thoughts with which he struggled. But at last he brought into action his resolve to work, and at last he was enabled for a time to forget his troubles. Instead of Priscilla the Fleet; instead of Minnie the foundations of the Metropolitan Railway; and so he obtained momentary ease. For an hour or two he read and noted steadily through the coughing and the stupefying air, liking his work and feeling well employed. Then

an impulse seized him and he began to write to Priscilla. It was a long letter; but he had no other course, since he must either explain his position or leave it puzzling.

"My dearest Priscilla," he wrote, after much hesitation as to the manner of his address,—"I can't even now persuade myself that yesterday was a real day. If I could express what I went through! You see that I'm still thinking only of myself, and supposing that you were quite different. My dear, that is not true—even for a moment. I won't say any more about it, in case you should for the smallest time think it might be true. But first I must tell you how all the way home I wanted to come back and say that I had been a most terribly boring fellow, and that I knew it; and then I decided *not* to come back, as I felt sure *you* must know it. It didn't seem worth while to come back to accentuate the bad impression. You see how excited I am when I write to you.

"Well: I am clearer in mind now, and I want to explain exactly how I am placed. You know that I have my father and Roy and in particular Dorothy to look after. I will not, at whatever cost to myself, sacrifice Dorothy. That is one chief thing. The other is that you have always lived in a way that it would be impossible for me to manage—certainly for many years. Wait a minute: I know you are ready to make any number of sacrifices, simply because you are splendid. What I'm worrying about is whether I ought—knowing much more than you can know what these involve—to let you make them. You'll say, and from your point of view quite truly, that if we love each other well enough troubles will be almost splendid, for the mere conquering. I quite agree. I'm ready for all sorts of troubles. I've had plenty, and I know that they *can* be borne. But when I think of the horrible way my mother had to work, and when I think of Dorothy—who is a really wonderful girl—being spoilt by her routine work at home, I then

think of you meeting the same difficulties. Now they have been accustomed all their lives to work. You haven't. You don't know what it means. Forgive me. If you had been a poor girl (I mean a girl who had lived in poverty) I should not hesitate. I should say to my father and to Roy that they must shift for themselves—at least, I think I could do that—and I should explain to you about Dorothy and get you to advise. Also no doubt Dorothy would have something to say on her own account! She generally has. Then you and I would go and live in a half-crown cottage somewhere, and you would quickly find out that life without society was impossible.

"Am I writing miserably? I don't mean to do that. I only see you unselfishly giving up comfort, and almost giving up friends, to come to me. I know what people are; and if they found you married to me and living somewhere in two rooms they would think that you were mad and that I was a cad ever to have let you do it. I shouldn't mind what they thought. Would you? I *know* I am seeming to underrate your strength. It is beastly of me to write in this way. I want to make so horribly unattractive a picture of the consequences of marrying me that when you find them quite as bad as you expect you won't feel I've deceived you. Then there are other things. You would be bound to entertain. Entertainment is part of your world. How about two rooms and a charwoman and not enough knives and all that? Can you imagine that? Sometimes I feel in despair at the gulf between us.

"Can you imagine that in spite of all this rigmarole my one desire is to marry you? That all the rest is so much cobweb? I know it is cobweb; but I know the effects of cobwebs. They're nothing now—things to joke about. Only, do you realize that there's no escaping from them? If once you do realize, and then feel ready to marry me, I will adore you (as I do now, of course); but as long as

you think that you can put all difficulties and cobwebs out of account, and that our love is independent of meals and the paraphernalia of daily life I shall be frightened in case you wake up and think I've deceived you. If there is no deception, and I'm only being frightened because I don't properly appreciate you, will you try to forgive me? It is just on that one point that I am genuinely afraid.

"My dearest, I wish I could say what I want to. I can't. I feel as though I were trying and trying all the time to say it and never getting near it. All I *want* to say really is that I love you and must marry you: all that I succeed in saying is that I'm afraid, and that I'm particularly afraid of your weakness and ignorance—and so on. But if I didn't *know* better I couldn't send you such base words, could I? It is only because I'm sure of your love and courage that I have the love and courage to put these sordid considerations before you. If I wasn't sure, I could never do it. But then I love you.

"It is for you to tell me when I may come to Totteridge again. And may I bring Dorothy? I want you to know her. I want her to know you and your mother. By the way, we've seemed (only seemed) in talking about marriage to ignore your mother and father. They're both splendid; but would they draw the line at me? They must have had quite other ideas. They couldn't want you to marry a shabby failure. Would they draw the line? If they did we should have to persuade them, shouldn't we? Tell me when I may come. I should like you to see my home. It would be a shock to you; but after that you would certainly know once and for all whether you could bear to marry me and afterwards live with me, which is what it comes to. I don't know what the etiquette is. Will you ask your mother if she could bring you?

"Forgive me for everything. With all my love, Stephen."

Stephen knew as well as anybody could possibly do that this letter would not bring home to Priscilla the difference that lay between them. He did not exaggerate the genuine importance of such differences. But he knew the Evandines' home. He knew that the Evandines belonged to another social world from his own—a world that he only entered on sufferance and by the Evandines' peculiar courtesy. Quite half the people whom he met at Totteridge, he knew, or perhaps only imagined, because sensitive persons easily misconstrue impoliteness or indifference, would probably fail to see him if they met in the street—because he was unknown, because he was poor. The bitter experience of rebuff from conventionally bred people of a different order was deep in his heart. He would never forgive it because it was a class resentment. Personal insult he never resented; the cultivated rudeness of the well-to-do was something not levelled at him as an individual. It was the manifestation of a particular kind of prejudice, and to be felt and scorned as the brand of an insufferable class. Stephen would never do as some men do, imitate the class and ape its prejudice: the suburbs are full of such men. He would never accept any free assumption of his personal inferiority, because he found that all the men and women whom he admired or respected were absolutely free from the prejudice he so much loathed. Nevertheless, in his detestation of the social push elsewhere so much cultivated he was deliberately stultifying himself and destroying his opportunity of gaining wider experience as an individual; and he was aware that this point was one upon which Priscilla and he might perhaps never reach total agreement. She had all her life been used to a kind of society, and would turn naturally to it—would seek to preserve her relation with it. She would want tennis and exhibitions and concerts and tolerably intelligent talk upon artistic reputations and current movements. He, who

either ignored it or was ignored by it (the distinction was one simply of the point of view), would continue to shun that society, from dislike quite as much as from inability to afford to take any part in its functions. According to Stephen, the "real" man could afford to live outside all coteries, pushes, parties, congenial gatherings, etc., safe in the performance of his own purpose.

He demanded entire liberty, as though he were a man of eccentric and admitted genius. He was still young enough to quote Emerson, and to believe in independence of thought as the one way to salvation. Yet he prided himself upon intellectual normality, and kept himself very much, as it is called, "to himself," as those men sometimes do—but for reasons unlike those of Stephen—who have not very much personality and who are at pains thus to conserve it. His attitude was based upon a fallacy, or at best, so far as the modern literary life is concerned, upon a half-truth. It had its cultivation in his vanity. It was not true that he was better off without friends, without society. He only believed that this was the truth.

Priscilla and Dorothy would both have put their finger upon his real motive without any difficulty at all. Taking into consideration all the facts, they would have said, in a sort of maidenly chorus of arch, penetrating sympathy, "He's shy!"

iv

After another half-hour's cogitation Stephen wrote a second letter. It was very short, and very different from the one he had previously written. It ran:

"Dear Minnie,—I will come in for a little while on Thursday, about eight.—Stephen."

When that was sealed he put the two letters away—not together, but in different pockets. The silvery chime of the reading-room clock signalled twelve o'clock; and with a sense of weariness Stephen pushed aside his work,

took his hat, and went out to post his letters and to eat some lunch. His mouth was twisted in a rather grim smile as he posted the letters. He heard them drop singly into the pillar-box. Each of them was a commitment.

CHAPTER VII: ORDEALS

i

PRISCILLA said:

"Well, you're not to be ridiculous any more; and mother and I are coming to see you next Tuesday; and I think Dorothy is the jolliest girl I ever met and I blame you very much for not letting us meet before; and I feel so enormously happy that I'm sure all your troubles will fall like the walls of Jericho."

Stephen sighed; but there was no doubt at all that his sigh was merely one of perplexity, and not one of doubt. He found her enchanting, and he wasn't going to prevent himself from acknowledging that.

"Very well, dear," he answered, "we'll see."

"Come along then. We'll show Dorothy my garden . . . and the rose-bush."

Priscilla rose, extending her hand, and, as he caught it, permitted Stephen to draw her to him. Her face was alight with happiness—too naïve to be anything but tempting to a lover. He found it irresistible. Laughter came into his own expression as he kissed her, still with a thrilling sense of strangely privileged adventure.

"I should occasionally like you to say that you're happy too," she suggested.

"I haven't the gift of facility," Stephen replied with a demureness equal to her own.

"Felicity?" Priscilla inquired. "That sounds almost more exactly truthful, don't you think?"

"Do you think my nature's so soured?" He could not be anything but thoughtful at her light words.

"It's just a little . . . what's the word? . . . pessimistic?"

He reflected. The word did not appeal to his sense of reality, so he ventured another in its place.

"Shall we say 'wise'?" But that, it seemed, would not meet the case.

"Not a bit wise. I'm the wise one. Because I've got faith."

She challenged him, a little defiance in her tone.

"Oh, I know what I'm talking about," Stephen said, with some obstinacy. "It's easy enough to love you; there's no virtue in that. And in point of fact it isn't you I worry about."

"Not me? Who is it then?"

"Not a woman or a man; it's society . . . everything that is the enemy of the individual."

Priscilla was struck by something in his tone, something that seemed almost familiar to her in the phrase.

"Why, my dear Stephen!" she said uneasily; "you're talking like that old gentleman in the play. Was it Doctor Stockman?" Then her voice took on a more rallying air. She remembered a happy figure, and used it to tease him. "Society ought to be your oyster: your tool. Just make it your willing dupe. That's what you've got to do. You'll see . . ."

Stephen frowned a little.

"My dear, you're mistaking my lot. That's what distresses me. It's as though I were somebody original. It's such an awful mistake." He did not want to chill her, but to hint a line of safety.

"You *are* original," she insisted.

"No." He still shook his head. "I'm a critic. I'm not creative. If I could only somehow burst out of my limitations and achieve something first-hand—not derivative. I'm living on other men's minds."

"You're understanding them—which is better than just pretending to be different, as so many men do. You couldn't criticize truly if you had no imagination. My

dear Stephen, mother and I agree that imagination is the critic's weapon. *Your* weapon."

He could see the delicious vivacity with which she pronounced these words, smiling with delighted triumph.

"You're very kind; but you overrate mine. I don't want to be solemn; but I'm really an analyst. Or rather, I'm only a . . . a boring instrument. A sort of drill."

Priscilla laughed outright; but she felt bound to protest.

"Stephen, your figures are very . . . unhappy. I'm going to make you happy. I'm going to make you believe in yourself." She beat down his attempted correction of that effort to interpret his state of mind. "And *you're* going to carry on the good work."

"By making you happy?"

"What does it matter? I'm happy now."

"But if I made you unhappy?"

Priscilla stopped suddenly in her effort to challenge his outlook.

"That would be an awful failure," she said simply. "But then you're not going to. You could only make me unhappy by deceiving me. And you won't ever do that."

Her speech and her clear eyes were alike renewed testimony to her unquestioning confidence in him. What wonder that Stephen was conscious of a thrill that was almost a pang? With such confidence behind him might not any man learn to go forward unhesitatingly? To Stephen that was a new experience and a rare thought. He followed her in silence.

ii

They found Dorothy, miraculously concealing her awe of the whole business, sitting talking to Mrs. Evandine. She had made no self-conscious attempt to conceal her hands, and the two other women had noticed these with

a little warm feeling of pity that neither could have restrained. Dorothy's work-roughened hands stood to them as mute testimony to her share in Stephen's life. And another thing Mrs. Evandine had noticed was that the relation between Dorothy and her brother was as near perfect as it could be. She had feared that perhaps it might be, as in new surroundings such relationship sometimes is, rather demonstrative. It was not. Upon both sides it was entirely dignified and intimate. Dorothy was her brother's adorer; but Stephen was Dorothy's wise protector. The recognition made Mrs. Evandine respect both, and it slightly relieved one of her hesitations about Stephen. She saw that Dorothy owed much to him. How much she of course could not tell, since she had no inkling of the relationship that had begun in Dorothy's cradle, when Stephen had been nurse and playmate, teacher and little boy, separately in rapid succession or all at once—rôles as countless as those of Pooh-Bah, and not as well-salaried. The likeness between them she curiously conned when both were within sight; and it puzzled her. Both were dark, but Dorothy was like a bright little berry, flashing, merry, and irrepressible; Stephen was grim, sombre, only occasionally smiling, and never showing any of his sister's electric vivaciousness. Both, however, moved quietly and swiftly, with an easy and graceful carriage. The suddenness of Dorothy's movements, which for a time kept Romeo at a distance, was in contrast to Stephen's more deliberate manner. Yet Mrs. Evandine was aware that to know Dorothy was to understand Stephen better; and once Priscilla and Dorothy exchanged a quick look of happiness when Mrs. Evandine laid her hand gently upon Stephen's arm. It was the slightest gesture, but the pride of both girls was touched and satisfied by its significance. That glance would have been enough to show an observer that Stephen, whatever his gloomy and distressing faults,

must somewhere have concealed within him a subtle quality to be appreciated only by the loving hearts of women. And perhaps in that glance was first created the lasting affection which grew up between Dorothy and Priscilla. It was not simply that both had discovered or invented a virtue for Stephen; it was that each knew that the other cared more for Stephen than for herself. Both loved him, not possessively or selfishly, but with a sublime imagination that, if he had known it, would have made the young man fly speedily for shame from that embarrassing scene. But he, talking to Mrs. Evandine, and engaged in liking *her,* was blissfully unconscious of the whole affair. His awkwardness, the sense that the Evandines were bound to regard him as a scheming interloper, an outsider who had plunged for once into the part of adventurer, was gradually giving way to a wiser sense of their extreme kindness. He even did not dread his approaching talk with Mr. Evandine, which both Priscilla and he had agreed should be concluded as soon as possible.

"Dorothy has been telling me about your researches into the history of the Fleet River," Mrs. Evandine said. "You must tell my husband about them. That is a thing he'd be very interested to hear about."

"I've also been telling Mrs. Evandine about the old man," remarked Dorothy.

"I hope not!" muttered Stephen to himself, with a look of horror.

"About his love of Islington." The explanation was timely. "Dorothy's been describing a shop where you used to buy jumbles for her."

"There was a splendid shop where he used to get me toffee-apples. Apples stuck on pieces of firewood and covered with toffee. They were splendid. One never sees them now."

They all laughed at her obvious regret that the trade in toffee-apples should have declined.

"They were very green apples," Stephen said reflectively. "I don't think they could have been so very good for you. Dorothy and I used to walk down St. John Street Road and through some of the old streets there —where the old wells used to be . . . Sadler's Wells and the old Islington Wells, that were renamed . . . to get these toffee-apples in a back street. I'm afraid Dorothy knew the way there almost too well."

"I can still see the window. And the place in Exmouth Street where you used to go to get eels for the old man's supper. . . ." There was a sort of hush at this particular memory. Then Dorothy went on, still blithely, in spite of the silence: "Stephen had to cook the horrid things. Did you know that he was a splendid cook?"

"I wish I was," Priscilla said, ruefully.

"It's a useful thing in a man." Dorothy's tact was for a moment splendid. She included them all in a benign and infectious smile. Then, impulsively, she fell earthward in her eagerness to be of use to her new friend. "I'll teach you . . . if your mother . . . Really, I'm a good cook . . . Stephen will testify."

Mrs. Evandine could not restrain her smile; but she was not embarrassed, whereas Priscilla was filled with sudden consternation at her own ignorance. She had her first stab of understanding of Stephen's doubt. This and the glimpse of Dorothy's work-worn hands had their effect upon her. She was struck hard. The few things Dorothy had said had revealed to her a life that really was quite different from her own. She recalled Stephen's remark about the consequence of a visit to his home. Her rather vague determinations to work for him had not hitherto touched the *fact* of working. But she now understood better. She no longer felt that his caution had been ridiculous. She could and would bear whatever marriage with him might involve. If she had been brought up in one way there was all the more reason why

she should learn gladly to adapt herself to another way of living. Nevertheless, she had been unwillingly conscious of a momentary chilled shame.

iii

"You were going to show me your garden," Dorothy said:

"You'd really like to see it? Shall we go now?"

The two girls walked away from the others and out across the sunlit lawn into a path beyond. They walked slowly together in perfect harmony, and Priscilla, observing Romeo in the neighbourhood, where he was engaged in secret plans to capture a thrush (a capture which Romeo had never, in spite of all pains, succeeded in making), began to tell the story of his remarkable character. She found in Dorothy an eager listener.

"But how splendid!" Dorothy exclaimed. "He *looks* very intelligent. He's got such globular eyes. We've never had a cat. We couldn't, you know; because we live upstairs, and the downstairs people are so unpleasant unless they like you and so horribly inquisitive if they do; and the poor thing could only walk on the tiles. It's different here. You know, I've never seen a house like this before, or such a garden. It's like walking about in Waterlow Park, only not so crowded. I hope you don't mind my speaking about it as a wonder. I expect it's very ill-bred of me; but then you see it's all so unfamiliar."

"Does it, then, make you afraid about me? I mean, about my marrying Stephen?" asked Priscilla a little wistfully. "He was afraid; and I see that there's somehow a great difference . . . I'm just a little nervous in case I can't do properly what . . . But I can learn. I don't see why I shouldn't be able to learn."

For a moment Dorothy hesitated. It was wonderful

to her to see the proud modesty of this lovely girl for whom she was so quickly feeling a motherly pity. She bent her wise little head before she answered. At length:

"If I were you I shouldn't worry. I think it's just splendid of you to marry him; and so does he. Only you'd never think it! That's his nature; as you must know. Besides, if you mean that you think Stephen's going to live in lodgings all his life, you've let him depress you. It's only his fun. That man . . ." she paused. "Years hence Stephen will be grumbling because he can't live on a thousand a year. If you'd seen him ten years ago! Sitting mending holes in his trousers and cobbling his boots, and making toys for Roy. And grumbling . . ."

Priscilla was smiling with relief.

"And are you really glad?" she ventured to ask. Dorothy looked carefully round.

"I think it's wonderful," she declared. "I'm awfully glad, because it's what I've always longed for." Then, very quickly, she added: "Don't let Stephen know I said it; but I'd give all I've got—which isn't much—to see the old man's face when he hears the news! If he isn't absolutely struck dumb I shall be amazed. You see, he thought Stephen was safe to keep him all his days!"

"Oh, who *is* the old man?" begged Priscilla. "Is he your father?"

"He's one of the worst!" said Dorothy solemnly.

Awed, Priscilla could ask no more. She imagined something almost unimaginably awful.

iv

"The old man," proceeded Dorothy, after an interested pause. ". . . Oh, isn't that a beautiful rose! Though I prefer the red ones, just as Stephen does. The old man

is one of those marvellous people who simply happen. You and I, and Stephen, and so on, have to live. But the old man's like the lilies of the field, or the birds of the air. Has Stephen never told you about him? Well, of course he wouldn't! You know, nice girls never say unkind things, and as I say unkind things I can't be a nice girl —that's a syllo-something. But I must tell you, that the old man is simply the most marvellous impostor you ever dreamt of. He's our father. And if you want to know anything about our family you must come to me. It's almost extraordinary how much I know. If you ask Stephen you won't get the truth though; because he's constitutionally incapable of telling the truth."

"Oh!" cried Priscilla.

"It's true. Stephen's a gentleman. Now a girl isn't bound to be a gentleman, so she can tell the truth."

"Is that a sign of being a gentleman? I've always wondered what the test was."

"Well, you mustn't even then apply it too . . . what's that funny word all the critics use—or misuse, as Stephen says? . . . too matriculously. They wouldn't stand it. However, I can tell *all* about Stephen. Or perhaps not quite all; though a week ago"—she stopped with rueful hesitation—"I should have insisted that I knew everything. And I know the old man through and through. And Roy!"

"Tell me about Roy," begged Priscilla. "And I should love to hear about the . . . about . . ."

"You haven't heard the last of Roy," said Dorothy. "Stephen doesn't realize about Roy, because there's quite a good deal that is outside his nature. I mean, there are things in Roy that he wouldn't like to admit are there. Things that even I don't know well enough to express—only to feel, and recognize. Do you know that feeling? —that you can *see* things and people and not know how to describe them. . . . It's an uncanny thing, that makes

you feel awfully helpless when you think about it. I don't think Stephen can feel quite that way. I think that he simply doesn't know *anything* he can't express. It just doesn't exist for him. Do you feel that? Besides . . . he's a sentimentalist."

"It's all very interesting; and I know what you mean about not being able to say what you think. . . . But about sentimentality: do you mean Roy? Or Stephen?" asked Priscilla. "I shouldn't have thought Stephen . . ."

Dorothy turned round eyes upon her.

"Not Roy . . . Gracious! He's not a sentimentalist. He's rather like the old man in some ways. But he's afraid of Stephen, and very fond of him. When you live with Stephen you can't help being fond of him. That's the marvellous thing about the old man. He hates Stephen. Simply hates him. And if Roy didn't love Stephen he'd be quite . . . in a way I think almost—not wicked, you know, nor weak; but somehow *mean*. I think I don't so much object to wickedness or weakness. But meanness is simply loathsome—sort of unworthy and unmanly, without doing anything specially wrong. If you knew Roy you'd see what I mean. . . . But I'm boring you, and talking a terrible lot."

"Please go on! Tell me about your father."

"No, I'd rather not, if you don't mind. Because I feel as though I'd been gabbling; and I don't really gabble. The only reason I've been doing it is that . . . I'm rather excited, and I suppose that makes me talk quickly. It does some people. And then I like you very much and I've never had a girl friend."

"I've never had a real one either; though I haven't so much felt the need because I've had mother."

Somehow their talk had brought them very close together in sympathy; as though they might have learned the alphabet of each other's spiritual language, which is the necessary preliminary to all friendship. It was not

what Dorothy had said so much as what she had not said that gave Priscilla so strong a sense of her individuality; and to Dorothy it was less what Priscilla had said than what she had interestedly allowed to be said that made her seem so exceedingly honest and candid. Dorothy was very quick in her sympathies and her antipathies; she read personality very quickly and on the whole very surely; and in this case her intuitions were—if not especially profound—at least very acute and not finally to be found very far from the truth. One thing that moved her greatly was the thought that she could talk so naturally, in spite of all differences of feeling and experience, to the girl who was to be Stephen's wife. When she thought of it the fact brought tears of relief to her bright eyes. How much she gained by Stephen's success in love!

They stood and looked back along the path they had traversed. It lay beside a low wall, upon the other side of which was the Dutch garden. Far away, still within view but seemingly isolated by the exaggerated distance, they could see Mrs. Evandine talking earnestly to Stephen. In the middle ground sat Romeo. Right along the path, near the house, they could distinguish three further figures coming towards them—Mr. Evandine, David, and Hilary Badoureau.

"D'you see?" Priscilla said, with a sudden charming breathlessness. "The smaller dark young man is David —my brother; the tall fair one is a friend of ours, Mr. Badoureau. And the third is father. I wonder what they've all come out for! But of course it's to see you!"

"Me?" asked Dorothy, like a little bird, ever so slightly fluttered. "How kind of them."

"They're all nice men." Priscilla was laughing rather nervously. "You'll be amused at them." But to herself all the time she was speaking Priscilla had been whispering, "Oh, I hope they won't quarrel. . . . Oh,

mother, don't let them quarrel!" For she knew that the meeting on that afternoon was the first misfortune that had befallen her since Stephen had returned.

V

And indeed there was a constraint among the men as they met. They stood almost with conscious sheepishness before Mrs. Evandine—Mr. Evandine with an air of preciousness which only discomfort could produce; Stephen square, blunt, and rather shabby in his blue serge suit; David slim and graceful in strict morning dress such as he often wore at the office; and Hilary very tall and fair, looking almost like a splendid guardsman in mufti as he lounged in his so obviously perfect-fitting tweeds. Stephen tried to crush back his feeling of animosity towards Hilary; but Hilary's rather elaborate indifference to him was almost offensive, and their greeting was brief. Moreover Hilary was without doubt rude in ignoring at least one speech of Stephen's, made with a great effort and with definitely pacific intention. Instead of answering it he looked at Stephen with a blank face and said something to Mrs. Evandine. Stephen's face whitened, and he turned away. Presently he and Mr. Evandine fell into a discussion of the work of a half-forgotten poet, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, and became oblivious of the further conversation. They even turned quite away from the others, and Mr. Evandine, well pleased to make Stephen talk, sauntered beside him with a gravely inclined head, irresistibly attracted and stimulated by fresh opinions with which he did not wholly agree. Hilary took the opportunity to say quickly to David: "I say, what's that chap doing here?" To which David answered with a curtness that startled him: "You'd better ask him yourself." There could be no satisfaction for Hilary now until he had himself investigated the truth.

He spent a bewildered five minutes, answering at random to Mrs. Evandine, until Priscilla came towards them in Dorothy's company. To his jealous apprehensiveness it seemed that her colour deepened slightly as she joined the group; but she did not seem to be embarrassed at seeing him. Was that a good sign or a bad one? Presently he noticed how often her glance strayed to the two wandering figures on the tennis lawn. "That fellow!" he thought savagely, with a scathing sense of physical superiority to this limping man in the shabby suit who could interest Mr. Evandine.

"Mr. Evandine," Stephen was at that moment saying as he walked with his future father-in-law at a distance from the others, "Priscilla says that you know what I want to ask. I feel a horrible knave in offering myself, so manifestly incapable of giving her what she's used to; but I'm willing to tell you all about myself and to abide by your decision——"

"If it's favourable?" suggested Mr. Evandine, with a dry smile. The side look which he cast behind his circular rimless spectacles was one of the utmost shrewdness, which his companion somehow missed.

"That's just the question," said Stephen, not insensible to Mr. Evandine's tone and the humorous perception which it indicated. "The truth is, I can't take an absolute 'No,' though I'm almost ashamed to expect anything but a most hesitating half-consent."

"Yiss, yiss," said Mr. Evandine, glancing uneasily about, and blinking a little. "I'll tell you exactly how it strikes me, my boy. You mustn't think me unfriendly. In fact, I'm sure you don't; and that this is a thing we can talk of quite . . . reasonably. Eh, eh? If I were a wholly wise man I might perhaps insist on saying 'No.' As you know, we had no definite wish for Priscilla; and to you personally I have nothing but kind feelings. You believe me? But it's quite true that in some ways I think

it a most unwise arrangement—at least, proposal. You won't accept . . . You see, my boy, I don't understand how you propose to live. You don't see your way, I understand, to accept any pecuniary help."

"No," Stephen answered him. "I think Priscilla would rather I didn't. And I couldn't bear it myself, even if she wanted it. I should be ashamed. It would create a false position at once."

"I think you're right. And yet, you see . . ."

"I can and will make a way for myself. She feels that. It's a part of her great . . . well, her bravery. But all the same I'm resolved to make a way."

"I'm sure you can." Mr. Evandine's manner was entirely kind. His sympathy was clear. But so also was his hesitant desire to say another thing, to urge his real objection. "Only slowly, though. And in the mean time?"

"I've tried to persuade Priscilla from taking that immediate risk. But she's a very game girl."

"Eh, eh? Very what?" begged Mr. Evandine.

"Plucky. . . . And I think it will do her good."

"Rilly." Mr. Evandine thought Stephen rather assured in his disposal of Priscilla. It made him ever so slightly frown and lower his head, so that Stephen could see his eyes over his rimless spectacles. "However, Priscilla is determined; and I find her mother is entirely . . . eh . . . on Priscilla's side."

"She's splendid!" burst gratefully from Stephen. "I feel abject before both of them—ashamed to come offering myself so brazenly when I know so well . . ."

"The modern woman is curiously adventurous. . . . Curiously. Curiously. Yiss, yiss. But, Stephen, I understand my wife to say that you did not share this . . . this curious desire to take risks. I almost hoped to find you—from what she said—something of a remarkable ally."

Stephen laughed excitedly, driven quite out of his gravity by a sense of the diplomatic situation. The appeal brought out very frankly the point which really had bolstered up his courage and undermined his self-distrust.

"Mr. Evandine, if I may be quite frank. I want to marry Priscilla. Priscilla wants to take risks. To defy her would be to make her less happy and sure of me—to make her think less of me. That's a risk that to me outweighs all the others. The other risks are there; but I've come to an understanding with Priscilla and I won't go back on it—on her—on myself. If I were alone I should not mind risk. I'm not, on my own account, a coward. The thing that holds me back is a partly timid, partly genuine sense of duty to others. The difficulty arises, and it's very, very anxious. But with Mrs. Evandine's help I think I can arrange. And I'm so sure of Priscilla's character that I'm ready to be quite sure that she'll bear the strain. I do sometimes feel qualms—when I'm alone and when I'm tired. I can't help it. It seems to me only natural. But it is for you to say whether you can bear to let me take the risk with her."

Mr. Evandine here uttered a profound truth, of whose profundity he was distinctly and unwillingly aware. His voice lost its fastidious, high-pitched, thin pipe; and sank once to a lower note and a note of intimacy which Stephen had never once before heard in all their talks.

"Stephen, I've no voice in the matter. I'm helpless in their hands. I only beg that if you find things going badly—and I don't think you will—you'll let me help you just out of your difficulty. What do you say to that?" He had lost his nervousness; he was ready to take Stephen upon level terms, as a man. He was even rather moved, a danger against which he had all the time been fighting, because he knew that it might make them uncomfortable. They could not shake hands; but they

did for one moment stand together in silence to mark their mutual respect.

With every sign of relief, confidence, and liking, the two men wandered back to the larger group. It was then that Hilary was sure of Priscilla's tremulous smile of love at Stephen; and his face was crimsoned with a surge of blind anger. Upon Stephen's cheek was another flush; but it was one of surprised gladness such as he had never known, because he had become once more conscious of Priscilla's beauty and of his unbelievable good fortune. He had made, in fact, another friend; so that in this family he now had nothing but happiness. The sense of it almost from sheer wonder made him laugh; and for a moment his voice thrilled as he spoke to Mrs. Evandine.

"You're quite content, Stephen?" she gently asked, too low to be overheard.

"Content!" he said impetuously. "But Mrs. Evandine —to you I'm . . ."

Hilary was amazed at the voices around him. His mind took in only two names—Stephen, Dorothy. That meant that the man was accepted here as a friend. This man! His eye contemptuously swept Stephen, finding him unmistakably plebeian, arrogant, inferior. . . . Yet in every face, swiftly interrogated, he read the certainty that the Evandines, for some quality or attribute overlooked or ignored, were unconscious of the signs of inferiority which to himself were only too plain. Could it be that they did not see the fellow's lack of breeding? Was his sense of it only morbidly acute, so that he exaggerated the clear signs beyond their sufficient meaning? How extraordinary that he had never once anticipated what had actually come to pass. He had never once supposed that he could have a rival. And the question now arose—urgently demanding a clear reply—was it yet too late?

vi

During tea Hilary watched Stephen with a heatedly-cool deliberate scrutiny. Partly his expression was one of restrained contempt, partly of unwilling curiosity. He watched every passing shadow upon the hostile face, and was surprised to find how much and how quickly it changed. He found himself forced into an unwilling admiration: he could not have thought that a face so apparently set should be capable of showing so great a variety of fleeting moods. He saw that Stephen, for all his gravely impassive bearing, unostentatiously followed the conversation with incessant keenness; that he was never at a loss to understand what was said to himself or to others. Hilary wondered of what that comprehension of all that was going on reminded him. He thought of adjustment . . . gear . . . timing . . . of that particular sensation one has when words slip inevitably into their places in exquisite verse . . . of some sort of sureness in the painter's art. Not there did he find his illustration. It was something, he felt, to do with a motor . . . gear . . . speed. . . . That was it! He had a speedometer in front of him as he drove his car; and that fascinating hand that marked every smallest variation of speed was the thing he was recalling. It had been his marvel and his delight ever since he had bought the car. It had impressed him with its uncanny precision, its extraordinary superhuman sense of the vagaries of pace, more wonderful than power or the registration of time. He began to recognize that this man's brain, or some inexplicable part of his nature, was as sensitively trained to register what was going on as was the hand of the speedometer. With gathering respect grew fear. With fear, the ignorant and now discredited contempt was wholly driven out by hatred. He knew that he hated Stephen—no longer disdaining him, or in any way rating

low his person or his personality, but recognizing the latter as strong enough for hatred, as a dire malign force which he must suddenly with all his energy combat.

All this Hilary discovered within himself—not quite consciously, but dimly and involuntarily. But as yet he had only a sinking of the heart, a dread. He felt that he must go very carefully . . . very carefully. The word "careful" was often between his teeth, tightly clenched. He must be careful . . . work carefully . . . not give the show away. This was a situation that required handling with the most delicate care. . . . It was a matter demanding extraordinary caution. Because only himself could penetrate to the full enormity of the danger, to the dark forest of this unreadable rival's secret heart.

Yet he found himself later fiercely saying to Priscilla, his voice, and indeed his whole body, vehemently trembling, and quite out of his control:

"This fellow . . . Priscilla . . . What does it all mean? He's not possible. He's . . . What——"

Quite white, but now very determined and in one sense thankful that the ordeal was past, Priscilla tried by will to steady her voice.

"Only . . . Hilary . . . We love each other. I'm going to marry him."

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" cried Hilary, horror in his face, his lips drawn back from his teeth, his blue eyes dark with the bitter blow. "What a *mess* you've made of it, Priscilla! What a ghastly mess! You must be mad!"

He turned away and left her standing there.

CHAPTER VIII: TEA WITH THE MOORES

i

IT was a merry party that gathered in Slapperton Street when Priscilla and her mother paid their first visit, for David had been invited and Dorothy and Stephen were in a state of high spirits compounded of joy and anxiety for the success of their feast. The others could never know of Dorothy's frantic purchase of crockery that matched and looked delicate, nor of Stephen's work during the morning in getting appropriate food-stuffs and other details of the meal. Dorothy, breathless with excitement and preparation, said that it all reminded her of one of the schoolboy scrambles in Talbot Baines Reed's incomparable school stories. It had always been the same with the Moores, from the time that they ate their meals off odd plates laid upon a tablecloth of old newspaper: they had never had enough crockery that matched, or an uncracked dish for the jam, or quite enough knives that were steady in their handles. They noticed, and even deplored, the imperfections of their cutlery and various services; but the money which would have made all good was needed for other things, and besides when one is used to incongruous dishes and cups and saucers there is a strange satisfaction to be derived from whatever is irregular. It is as though the inconveniences of a picnic were perpetuated and exalted into everyday phenomena.

They had lettuce, obtained by Stephen after great labour, and properly washed (which, as David courteously pointed out, was a unique experience), and they had strawberry jam newly made by Dorothy, and fresh strawberries and cream, and Dorothy's own potted meat

(which was preserved in little pots as if it had been the real professional stuff); and the room was rich with flowers, and bright and polished beyond any previous experience recalled by Stephen or Dorothy or, for that matter, supposing that furniture has any kind of recollection beyond the faint retained odours of its origin and cleanings, by the pictures and chairs and tables themselves. And Dorothy sat smiling at the table in a marvellous new muslin dress with a palest cream ground upon which were palest blue flowers intersprigged with small green incidents that might have been meant for little leaves or pieces of inconspicuous fern. Opposite to her sat Priscilla, whose frock was also a pale cream, but quite plain, and made apparently of casement cloth, very simply cut. Mrs. Evandine wore her fawn-coloured dress, because it was the nicest and most comfortable she had. Against these three graces what can be said of the duller clothes of the young men? It would be merely insulting to remark that they wore clean collars and clean shirts.

The trouble was, as Dorothy once, in the height of her pleasure, frowningly recognized, that while of course one didn't want the Evandines to think that this was a specially manufactured feast it was none the less true that it might give Priscilla a quite wrong idea of them. For herself, Dorothy didn't know whence the money had come or was coming for all these crocks and knives and lovely dishes and flowers . . . and the smallest and most charming of rings that sat by itself in a furry box in Stephen's waistcoat pocket—where his finger was always unconsciously and uncontrollably straying. But that might be as it might. Dorothy would not worry. She beamed upon the company with a harrowed watchfulness (for empty cups or plates) that would have been comical to anybody who saw it with detachment, and that was indeed comical to David, who perhaps of them all was most occupied in contemplating Dorothy in her charm and her

naïveté. He was teasing her during the whole meal, in his slow, quiet, drawling voice, that gave a whimsical dryness to all he said.

"You see, you'll be my sister-in-law," he was saying; "or at least the sister of my brother-in-law, and my sister's sister-in-law—the sister of the man my sister is going to marry. . . . So we're bound to be friends. They always are, you know. They have all the privileges of relationship and none of the cantankering bore. Besides, I understand that you're coming to stay with us when we've got Priscilla off our hands. That's not to be for months, of course; but we shall have to 'play you in' by a series of earlier visits. Shan't we? And do you know that I'm going to write an important work that your brother Stephen has lamentably missed the opportunity of writing? It's called *Prolegomena to Criticism*. Oh, so you're all listening? . . . Yes, *Prolegomena to Criticism*. The third section (after those on Theology and Philosophy, which are very profound) deals with Creative Literature—poetry, novels, plays, and so on. I've prepared the thesis. I shall say there are three divisions of Creative Literature—Classical, Anti-Classical (or Romantic), and Anti-Romantic (or Realistic). . . ."

"Are realistic works anti-classical?" inquired Stephen, inaudible at a distance.

"But what about the things that are none of those?" demanded Dorothy.

"Oh, they *must* belong to one or other if they're to be critically recognized. But I'll allow subdivisions. There are always the Classico-romantico-realistico combinations; and, among the basest types, the quasi—or pseudo—romantic, realistic, classic. I shall lay down to one tittle the exact constituents of a work of Creative Literature, settle the definition of Romance better than the Schlegels were ever able to do in spite of their Sisyphean labours, and of course come out very strong on Realism.

That is to say, I shall praise Russian, French, Spanish (the Spanish kind is going to be very much overrated in the future) realism; but I shall entirely condemn any English realism whatever; because everybody knows how dull, drab, sordid, depressing, and in every way contemptible any writer is in England who writes convincingly about anything."

"Anybody would think you were a novelist working off his spleen," suggested Stephen.

"Not at all," drawled David, suavely, unmoved by such a damaging comment: "I'm only writing *Prolegomena to Criticism* in the correct spirit of modest academic and theorist dogmatism. I shan't say anything about English romance, because there isn't any. Perhaps a few ignorant and inaccurate words about Scott. The 'great romantic and idle child' touch. I shall confine myself to the *theory* of romance in literature, because that gives scope for severity and controversial quotation. I shall have great sport determining whether Homer was classic or romantic and whether Euripides was a realist or not. . . ."

"I don't believe he's going to write any such book!" declared Dorothy stoutly; and thereby revealed such friendliness and intimacy with David that he was secretly delighted amid all their laughter.

"And of course David doesn't like what he calls realistic books," said Mrs. Evandine.

"Quite true," David admitted. "They terrify me. They are my bad conscience."

"I don't quite see," remarked Priscilla, rather dryly, "what is the particular point of all David's information about himself. Did anybody ask him for it?"

"Oh, Priscilla! How unkind!"

"That's always the way the ebullient heart is treated in England. People think that if you talk frankly about yourself you *must* be second-rate!" wailed David. "Whereas if, like Agg, you deliberately falsify your

opinions about yourself, and monologize the conversation, you *must* be a wit."

"Does anybody think Mr. Agg a wit?" inquired Mrs. Evandine. "It seems rather extravagant."

"Did you talk to Agg . . . Stephen?" David had adopted the Christian name without a qualm; and Priscilla noticed it with quick delight. "You know he was at Totteridge the other Sunday. He's the most amazing Rodomonte that I've ever met. If you could see Agg and Vanamure lunching together—both talking at once . . . long streams of monologue converted into continuous duet. Really awfully good!"

"They're both really very pleasant men," Mrs. Evandine protested, although she laughed a little at the picture; "and they're rather appreciative of . . ."

David interrupted, very coolly, talking as the blasé man of extreme comprehension.

"Yes, I know, mother: 'the *crème de la crème* of the best in literature' as old Vanamure says. But only Vanamure is pleasant. Agg, you know, is a publisher's reader; and that profession doesn't hold much native kindness and appreciation. They're unfortunate drudges. I speak feelingly, because I know. It's really incredible what a lot of rubbish one has to wade through. You, Stephen, talk of the rubbish that is published. I don't know whether you do; but I leave it at that. Just imagine that the publisher's reader is mostly dealing with stuff that isn't published; and you'll see how he deserves pity rather than abhorrence. I pity the author; and I pity the reviewer; but most of all I pity the publisher's reader. You can't expect them to be really sweet-tempered. I don't expect it of Agg; but he's such an egoist that he somehow survives to write those orotund novels of his."

"Personally, I don't find Mr. Agg very interesting," suggested Priscilla. "Need we?"

"How querulous she is!" David turned to Dorothy. They had some conversation; and Stephen heard Dorothy say: "You see his finger in his waistcoat pocket?" Whereat they both laughed, and Stephen hastily withdrew his finger, reddening under their mischievous eyes.

"I'm afraid David is undermining Dorothy's loyalty," Mrs. Evandine said to him. He explained:

"Her eyes are very sharp, and she's very outspoken. But I want Priscilla to see it first, before the others."

"Of course. . . ."

David was reciting to Dorothy a speech delivered by Bassanio towards the end of *The Merchant of Venice* and addressed to Portia. Priscilla, mystified, could only hear the words "the ring . . . the ring . . . the ring." Presently she glanced doubtfully at Stephen, who smiled as he again withdrew his finger from his waistcoat pocket.

ii

It was quite a surprise, amid this happy if not very distinctive chatter, for the company to find a stranger among them—an affable, smiling, elderly gentleman in a blue serge suit. His surprise, if he really felt any, was conveyed in bird-like becks as he greeted the guests at first collectively and then individually.

"Charmed," he said, "to find my young nestlings enjoying such unwonted gaiety. Delightful surprise. Pleasant company, dainty repast, *and all that . . .*"

It was the vagueness of his conclusion that sent lightning messages between Dorothy and Stephen. Priscilla saw the glow fade from Stephen's face. This must be the old man, of whom Dorothy had spoken. Dorothy had said, in a strong phrase, that he was "one of the worst." What, exactly, did such words mean? She could only see one whose bearing resembled that of an old actor. How curious his skin was! As if it had been

lightly powdered. She saw his thin, not quite red, lips part; and she thought his smile one of remarkably infectious bonhomie. What then did Stephen's changed face and Dorothy's ominous words mean when they were combined? She looked at her mother and at David, both of whom were smiling with obvious pleasure at the repeated words of gladness uttered by the old man. Nothing, clearly, had struck them as in any way wrong or disconcerting. Yet she could see that Dorothy had paled.

"And this delightful young lady . . ." said the old man, shaking her hand with extreme friendliness. "I trust that we may all be better acquainted. Thank you, no, Dorothy . . . my little Dolphy . . . I . . . pray excuse me. . . . For one moment I am called away. But I shall return, if you will allow me. . . . How kind you are!"

Smiling still, the old man backed away. Only as he turned in the doorway did Dorothy's eye encounter the object of her search—deep in the inner recesses of his coat an unmistakable cork.

When the old man had gone, David harked back to Agg, who for some perverse reason appealed to him this afternoon as a conversational stand-by, to the exclusion of other more valuable topics.

"Now, Agg," he said, and every adjective he used hereafter was drawled forth after a hesitation that was almost a stammer, and that gave to his speech an amusing air of pointed fastidiousness not unlike that of his father. "I don't know, Stephen, if you ever read one of his novels? They're extraordinarily florid, otiose works . . . rolling in fluent volubility, and as empty as balloons. They're all about some girl or some man, swollen great monstrous exaggerations, as though the people were all ten feet high and lived their lives very slowly. Plenty of time, says Agg; let's dwell on the significance of every

minute and every word. So these huge, formless, swollen masses of empty pseudo-psychology come wallowing out. . . . You can't tell one from the other; but they're full of brave words about art, and soul, and beauty, and sacred fires, and eternal wisdoms. Agg's an eternal wiseacre himself. Fancy his talking about art! *He's* not an artist, or anything like one." For some moments, in fact, David engaged himself in the process of revealing to the inattentive company some of his more ornate views upon modern writers. These views, delivered lazily, and with a good many finished hits at what he considered to be the certain or possible predilections of his individual hearers, took a great deal of time for their proper exposition. It was therefore not surprising that, just as everybody was beginning to fidget, or to yawn, or to frown, or to look faintly distressed, his superabundant discourse was checked by the re-entrance of the old man, who had bathed his face, brushed his hair, and changed both collar and handkerchief, from which latter article proceeded a striking scent of white violet. He seemed to regard the company with undiminished benignity.

"Did I catch the sound of some friendly argument?" he asked. "Argument is so dear to my heart. I often enjoy a quiet discussion with Stephen of the last book he has read. It's surprising how helpful I find that discussion in the following days. Stephen, of course, is always very much occupied. I'm afraid, dear boy, he works too closely. But when I see such . . . such perfectly charming company here I feel that perhaps . . . I have underestimated the friendships that my boy enjoys. And then I see that my little Dolphy has her friends here as well. . . . How kind that is. . . ."

He paused, looking gravely and respectfully from one upturned face to the other, until he came to the expressionless face of Stephen, who, in his ecstasy of self-control, had entirely suppressed any sign of emotion. He

looked as if he did not hear the old man, whose eye kindled as he allowed it to rest upon his elder son.

"We have so few friends," he said, a little pathetically, to Mrs. Evandine. Then, with a consummate change of tone and bearing, he swung back to Stephen. "By the way," he proceeded, with an added distinctness which made Dorothy grip the edge of the table, "I met this afternoon, quite near here, a friend of ours—of yours, Stephen—you will know whom I mean. A particular friend. She sent all kindest messages."

The old man's eyebrows were raised as he spoke; he seemed almost to lift himself upon his toes. Stephen suddenly remembered, with a thrill that sent him cold, the letter that had never reached him.

iii

The ill-breeding of the old man's last speech was the first thing that made Mrs. Evandine conscious of distaste for him. She looked a little grave. Where Stephen read menace, and Dorothy a little puzzle too slight to trouble her long, Mrs. Evandine was—although she was ignorant of any double meaning—really distressed at the old man's mysterious hinting. David saw more truly than any of the women. He could see the old man's eyes and mouth, and eyes and mouths will almost certainly remain among men and women the clearest indications from without of mood and character. Not only, to David, was there a falsity in the old man's manner of speech that jarred; but when he saw the shining hardness of eye and the cruel turn of the lips with which the old man gave secret meaning to his message, David read that meaning. David could quickly follow from words spoken to the thoughts and meanings that lay behind—a power that is denied to most people, who are too much occupied with the moment to go beyond—and he of all those who overheard the speech

was the only one to read into it a hint of malice. The meeting had obviously taken place with a woman; and what woman was there whose name was not freely mentioned? David looked quickly at Stephen; but except that his lips were slightly parted Stephen did not seem to be at all hurt. David, upon an impulse, dashed in with words to cover the moment's difficulty.

"We've been discussing and theorizing about art, Mr. Moore. You will know what a fertile subject that is. I wonder if it was much agitated when you were young."

The old man drew down the corners of his mouth in a quizzical smile.

"I don't know." The words were reflectively drawled. "Somehow, d'you see, it all seems so remote from the practical interests of these days—myes." The old man's drawn brow lightened, as if he cheerily threw off the strain of recollection. The unconquerable light of youth returned to his face. "I expect we were all very much like the young fellows of to-day. One likes to believe that one's own time was best. Do you know, Mr. Evandine," he charmingly went on, so that even Mrs. Evandine relaxed towards him, "that when I carry my mind back over the years, and think of my youth, I always remember *places* rather than persons or theories. I can remember all this district when Clerkenwell and Islington and St. Luke's were as sweet and interesting—grave old houses and gardens, occupied by the well-to-do—as some of the more distant suburbs of to-day that people visit by train or tramcar as holiday treats. It is *that* that I remember, Mr. Evandine; the old joys and the old grandeurs of these now shabby streets. The spirit has changed; quick growth means quick decay. You have your greater speed, Mr. Evandine; you go farther; it may be that you do more. But those of us who remember the old days—the good old days, we call them—when men were of the old

stamp and the old school—when sons loved their fathers and looked up to them, when the grey hairs of the fathers were honoured and not despised; when these same fathers were consulted . . . were the guides . . . instead of the spurned, the tolerated . . ."

The old man checked himself as he found his emotion rising. Mildly he turned to Dorothy.

"I fear that I am too . . . too garrulous, child. . . . Pardon an old man's fancy. When I remember my dear wife . . ."

"Really, really, father!" said Stephen in an intense low voice of extreme impatience.

The two men looked at one another for a moment, and the old man, shrugging his shoulders with a slight pitiful gesture of acquiescence, was silent. When he again spoke it was to address himself directly to Mrs. Evandine.

"I think you have never met my other son, my baby? I should like you to have seen him. He's a brave lad. The loss of his mother has borne most hardly upon him, as it has upon me. . . . But I see from Stephen's face that I've said too much . . . trespassed upon your patience. Stephen is my watch-dog, my Cerberus. . . . Sometimes he is a little fierce with me; but he's a good lad, a good lad. We understand one another very well."

Under his breath Stephen muttered to himself: "We do indeed." He was too ashamed to meet Priscilla's glance. No longer did he finger the pocket of his waistcoat where reposed the magical box with the furry lining and the precious content. There was the faintest hesitating pause. David again broke it.

"Where is it that you write?" he asked Stephen.

Stephen patted the table.

"Exactly here," he said. "I read at the window. The sun shines right on to the opposite houses as it sets—a sort of burning red light comes on the windows."

They went to the window and looked out; and Priscilla

caught Stephen's hand and pressed it, holding it still as she stood beside him, to show that she was all his. The old man had turned away to the sideboard, and was munching a sandwich that he had casually appropriated. Stephen's disengaged hand stole to his waistcoat pocket. While the others were looking down at the tiny figures that comically walked in the street below—little striding figures so curiously intent upon their errands and so marvellously far from seeming to be men and women—he perilously withdrew the box; and Priscilla, blushing and smiling and perhaps a trifle trembling, watched him unfasten the clasp and disclose the small ring so comfortably nestling against the plush. It was done in a moment, and the ring was upon her finger, and secretly kissed by Stephen in its new significant dignity, while yet the others contemplated life from unaccustomed angles. Even the old man, whose sharp eyes seemed sometimes as though they must furtively have glistened from the back of his head, was unaware of the swift transformation. Upon Priscilla's hand gleamed the ring; never any more would she be apart from Stephen; for as the heroes of the old fairy tales could call genii by the mere turning of the rings upon their fingers, so Priscilla must for ever call up the vision of Stephen and revive her memory of that strangely coloured afternoon by the action of touching the ring that he had given her. She would be able to feel it even in the darkness, very beautiful and precious as it lay so gently upon her hand.

iv

And afterwards, when, after some very kind invitations from all three of the Evandines, Stephen saw them on their way to King's Cross Station, Priscilla walked with her hand quietly within his arm, as boldly and as proudly "engaged" as any girl had ever been. She took

on a new sedateness as she went, and Mrs. Evandine's eyes were filled with a softness that was love and pity and happiness combined and indissolubly united. If she sighed, her sigh was not one of regret, though it perhaps held some regret as well, for she had a graver sense than any that Priscilla had as yet reached of the gravity of her child's engrossing adventure. But when they parted Mrs. Evandine warmly clasped Stephen's hand, and repeated her earnest invitation that he and Dorothy should come as often as they could to Totteridge.

David took Priscilla's arm and laughingly drew her away.

"We *must* catch our train, my dear Stephen. And the parting's so short. Better to be short. Come soon. Let us lunch: shall we? Ring me up, there's a good man. Good-bye. . . ."

Stephen stood for a moment looking after them until the traffic swallowed them up, and he could no longer see Priscilla. Then he made his way home again. The setting sun was hot upon the buildings that faced west, upon their blazing windows and transfigured chimney-pots. The day was going down in a red sunset, faithful promise for the morrow, and fit conclusion to that fateful visit. He did not think of anything but his happiness, that warmed his heart and made him humble before a vision of delight. How strange that love so simple and so entirely easy should have seemed only a fortnight before something beyond the furthest dreams of his imagination. How wonderful that Priscilla should love him! Glad and thankful and full of an overwhelming gratitude he retained the vision of her parting look. It brightened these dull streets, that fell away before him as he walked, like so many insubstantial vagaries of the dullard's mind. He reached his home, still in a reverie; still dreaming he ascended the stairs.

Not once had he thought of his father. Not once had he remembered any of the pain of the whole of his life, or even of that last hour when it seemed that some spring would surely break and throw the whole scene into a bitter confusion. Yet he was again reminded of all that had passed the moment he entered the room; for Dorothy stood by the mantelpiece with her head upon her arm—not crying, but white and spiritless, as if she had passed through some dreadful ordeal. As she heard his step she turned, and came and caught his hand.

"Oh, Stephen, Stephen!" she said, with her voice all shaking. "He's horrible! He's so horrible!"

"Poor old girl!" said Stephen, and awkwardly held her, so that her face was against his shoulder. "It's too bad!" Only for a moment did Dorothy stay so; for in her present excited restlessness she could not bear to be still.

"The moment you were gone . . . Oh, Stephen! I've never seen him as he was . . . He suddenly said: 'Who *are* these people?' And I said: 'Stephen's going to marry her.' He said: 'What!' I've never seen him like that—so ghastly, like some hideous dream. Hideous! I thought he was . . . For a minute I was frightened. I said: 'You wicked man . . . wicked'; and he laughed. I never heard such a laugh. It was devilish. . . ."

"My dear!" Stephen said. "He's an old sinner; but *that*——"

"It's true. It was so bitter, so ugly. What a cruel man he is! He said: 'We'll see' . . . He can't stop you, can he?"

"Of course not, child. How could he?" Stephen laughed quite gleefully. "That's one glorious thing. He'll wish he could. But he can't. As for his rage—It's only the shock of it."

"And I've been saying I wanted to see the effect of the news. I *did* see it!" Dorothy herself began to

laugh. "I suppose I asked for trouble! It was inquisitive and beastly of me. He's beside himself! Oh, but Stephen, I really was frightened of him. You won't . . . won't leave me to him, will you?" She lowered her voice, but the appeal was quite genuinely urgent.

"Never. When I go, you go too. It'll be all right." He was splendidly reassuring.

The rapid beating of Dorothy's heart began to subside.

"One thing I wonder," she presently murmured. "I wonder why he made all that mystery about . . . Oh, nothing. I'm only thinking out loud. It's being so much alone. You get into the habit."

Dorothy left off speaking. She turned again and faced her brother, with a glance in which archness and an inclination to tears struggled for mastery.

"Stephen . . ." she went on, in a very quiet voice, "I think Priscilla is lovely. And I think *it's* lovely. The ring, I mean. And I hope—oh, my dear, I do so hope that you'll be as happy as happy can be. As happy as you deserve. . . ."

PART TWO

THE STORY OF THE HUSBAND'S PROGRESS

CHAPTER IX: THE DAY OF PROMISE

i

STALCETT, the home of the Evandines, was very gay indeed. There were no festoons of lamps or obvious external decorations; but if it had lain in a busy thoroughfare the house would have been watched by half a hundred children and sentimentalists. There were many people there—people of all sorts and shapes and sizes, from the decorous Clodds and the soft and epithalamic Mr. Vanamure, to David and Professor Tidd (the decrepit Romanticist, who illustrated in his person the decay of his moribund study); from Montague Parvin, the beet-sugar expert who wanted to convert southern England into a sacchariferous area, to Vernon Agg, who had rather similar designs, according to David, upon the English novel. And there were hundreds—it almost seemed—of women, young, middle-aged, elderly; women with brains and women with no brains, women with character and women whose minds went no deeper than conventional observance of whatever was proper in life. There were no divorced women; but that was because Mrs. Evandine did not like any that she had met, and their absence was due not to general disapproval so much as to personal distaste. There was, it is true, one charming girl who had the reputation of stealing from them the husbands of other girls, a girl in the way of whose free entry into the homes of young married women obstacles were sedulously put, and who met with few such kind and sympathetic hostesses as Mrs. Evandine. But she was maligned, and was merely one irresistibly attractive to light-headed males, and not able to keep herself from

innocent flirtation. To give definite attention to each person present would need the skill and perhaps something more than the normal kindness of a Balzac; since the cruel or malicious eye, by concentrating upon pretensions or physical traits or the most trifling of animosities and suspicions and strangenesses, could so easily have turned ninety per cent. of the gathering to inextinguishable ridicule. It will be enough here to say that all these people were walking about the garden at Stalcett on a brilliant June day (about a year after the events of our previous chapter), as though the garden belonged to them and as though it were a very great deal smaller than it had seemed to Dorothy upon her first visit.

To Dorothy, in fact, the garden had steadily diminished in size. It no longer appeared to her as large as Waterlow Park. So, too, the house in these days was something less thrillingly immense to explore than Warwick Castle or any other famous country seat; but was become simply a place of the most exquisite comfort and imperfect privacy, with tremendous advantages in the way of ease and restfulness, and little disadvantages indicated by her still violently suppressed impulse to discuss all matters at meal-times. Dorothy had made acquaintance with Biddy, but she continued to be frightened of her, in spite of Biddy's evident amiability; because Dorothy always wanted to know whether Biddy liked her, and this it was beyond Biddy's power to convey save by way of large helpings or unobtrusive attentions. So Dorothy was afraid of Biddy, and shared some of Stephen's distrust of that matchless parlour-maid as a superior and sphinx-like person. Dorothy was now upon excellent terms with everybody else in the place—could trust Mrs. Evandine completely, could talk considerately to Mr. Evandine, had almost reached the point of teasing David as much as he teased her, which was a good deal. She had struck up a moderate friendship with Romeo; but they would never

be warm friends, because Dorothy moved too startlingly for Romeo's rather exacting taste.

Dorothy and Ethel Clodd were for to-day allies; they were dressed alike: they would have looked alike if only Ethel Clodd could for a single hour have flung studious virtue to the winds and been as quick and lively as Dorothy. As it was they were contrasted, the one all mercury, the other rather bewitchingly solemn. Ethel Clodd was a fair, white-faced girl, with grave eyes, who moved as if perhaps she were a little short-sighted and obliged to beware of stepping out of some charmed circle. She was really pretty, or she would have been pretty with a very little more animation; and when once she was interested in anything would talk with much good sense. Nevertheless, in spite of her prettiness, she was unattractive to men, who often underrate sterling excellences in casual partners. Ethel Clodd, however, could afford to wait. She was wise in her generation. Not all the flimsy vivacities of her shallower rivals could interfere with her destiny; which was that of a happy wife and mother. Hers was a lot forever to be envied by the early exhausted butterflies as they lost their looks and their tempers in the vain pursuit of transient happiness. She had rather prominent teeth, but they were only so prominent as to make her smile a very pleasant one; and everybody was led by that slow smile to be rather indulgent to her. She and Dorothy were excellent friends now, pitying one another a good deal, but otherwise not ungenerously alive to each other's qualities. Each had seen for some months that their association upon this day was inevitable, and had accepted with equanimity the duty and the significant partnership which fate had prepared for them. They had given much time and thought to the whole matter, and knew if possible more about the service and the bride's trousseau than did Priscilla herself, a fact not altogether without parallel upon other such occasions.

ii

Up in David's study the son of the house sat with Stephen, "pulling him round." It was all very lamentable that the bridegroom should not be moving easily among those who were assembled for his sacrifice; but Stephen had been so tried by the well-meant gushes of some of the ladies that David had watched with anxiety his inclination to become saturnine. At all costs, thought David, any slightest ruffling must be averted. Accordingly he had plucked the smouldering brand from the fire of conflict, and, having plied him with a glass of sherry and a biscuit, was busy talking about anything but the day. Neither had changed much in expression during the rapid year of Stephen's engagement; what change there had been was too gradual to be apparent to the casual glance. It might have been seen that Stephen was still too impatient, and that David was still charmingly lazy in appearance and very alert in fact. When one saw them together it was upon David's air of lively good-breeding that one looked with most satisfaction; and yet it was upon Stephen's personality that one lingered with the greater hesitation. That is to say, one liked David more than Stephen; but one could not help, from some perverse doubt, wondering what Stephen thought of this or that. Very likely the doubt was only personal, because mankind is fortunately intrigued by many diverse sorts of temperament: it was none the less quite conscious and unmistakable, and may for that reason be supposed to be not wholly groundless.

The two young men sat together, talking in snatches, every now and then for a stronger reason recurring to the numerous guests with their elaborate talk and compliment. And every time that Stephen recalled the ordeal through which he had passed he winced and tried to forestall any attempt from David to throw him back into the arena.

He forced himself to talk. Over and over again he revived a subject, for the sake of diverting his thoughts. But at last his native honesty triumphed over his cowardice.

"I know I really ought to go down and out again . . ." he impulsively said. "Hiding here! It's not fair, is it? But I wish they wouldn't stare and chatter. I *know* all they think and want to say. . . . I know it all before they begin to speak. And I want to go right through the talk and say, 'Yes, I *know* it's extraordinary that she should marry me, but marriages are always extraordinary.' That would be very rude, and not at all fair to Priscilla. Because it's clear that they're all very fond of her."

"Yes, my boy. If that's the speech that's on your tongue you're better away," admitted David, lolling in his chair, with his thin brown face drawn into an air of commiseration. "Tell Priscilla about it in the train. She'll be glad to hear about it. Save it all up for her. She can't rebel. You can say anything you like to your wife, you know."

Stephen laughed a little.

"I hope I shan't be as brutal as that. I shall tell her how jolly they are."

"She won't believe you. She knows better. I say: did you see Vanamure link up with Agg? What a treat that was! To hear Agg telling Vanamure about Zola and Vanamure talking simultaneously about the vernal freshness of the English countryside. . . . You know, for all his idiocy, Agg's got a sort of antic sense of sport. Have you ever noticed it? He *does* make one laugh at times."

"He only bores me," Stephen said, dolefully. "I *can't* stand these novelists. What's the good of them? I never met a novelist yet who wasn't an egoist. . . . They're so *vain!*"

David murmured with laughter:

"That's Satan rebuking sin, isn't it? With a vengeance!"

With a nodding of penitent disgust Stephen accepted the rebuke.

"I suppose it is. I suppose no egoist ever likes or can ever understand the egoism of anybody else. Unless he's got more sense of fun than I have, anyway. Agg's got that. I suppose he's quite decent. But *really*, some of his opinions are the crankiest I ever came across!"

David roared. Over and over again he laughed aloud. At last he spluttered:

"Remarkable thing. Astonishing thing. He was saying only the other day how curious it was that *you*, whom he regards as on the whole sound, should be derailed at times—absurdly!"

Stephen did not laugh. It could hardly have been expected of him.

"It's quite true," he said, with resignation.

"Fiddlesticks!" said David.

And with that the door opened, and Priscilla came in.

"Where's my husband?" she said. "I heard David's great roaring laughter. I knew it must be Stephen being witty."

They did not undeceive her. There was no need to do so. For Stephen was not really so devoid of a sense of fun as he pretended to be; and he was so much in love with Priscilla that he could bear to be teased by her without any slightest inclination to resentment. He followed her meekly from the room, his heart dancing.

iii

There was a breathless hurry of farewells and good wishes. Dorothy claimed Stephen for one anguished moment—the dreadful moment of their first parting—and at his quite unashamed embrace was able, through

her misty vision of the vanishing motor-car, to think in a flash of exultation: "He wasn't ashamed. He's still mine!" which was a consoling thought for those first blank minutes. Mrs. Evandine, parting in the same moment from her own girl, had something of the same assurance. Both of the women who remained turned naturally to David, who, less moved, less tragically the witness of an utter cleavage, kept his head and maintained his attitude of intimate sympathy. The rest of the party gathered with tepid outcry; and Mr. Vanamure was conscious of figuring in one more priceless enviable snapshot upon a distinguished occasion. There was not one unhappy face in all that crowd. The one miserably wretched and disconsolate creature in the house sat alone in Priscilla's bedroom, pathetically upon Priscilla's wedding-dress, puzzled and forlorn.

In the motor-car, suddenly shy and speechless, were the two chief actors in the comedy—pleasurably stunned by the silent privacy of the swiftly running vehicle, aware that the road and the trees were flashing noiselessly past them in a swimming blur of green and brown that had not yet merged together into a hazy grey. It was Priscilla who first recovered, who first laid her hand upon Stephen's hand, and recalled the one forsaken figure in the happy household.

"Romeo!" she said quickly. "Oh, Stephen! . . . It seems silly; but I can't help feeling so sorry for him. He knew I was going. It was so pathetic to see him sitting in my bedroom, watching. He's awfully unhappy, I'm sure."

Stephen took her hand—so slender within his large one with its strangely pointed fingers.

"But when we get back," he urged, "Romeo will come and live with us, won't he?"

"Of course. It's ridiculous to feel as I do; but he's so dumb. That's what's so very touching. If he'd *howled!*"

"I feel rather like that about Dorothy," Stephen confessed.

They were turning into the Great North Road, and were bumped against each other.

"Oh, but Dorothy *can* howl!" protested Priscilla. "I feel a little as though I were going to."

"The chauffeur would think we were trying to stop him!"

"Don't!" It was imploring, desperate; for the first tremulous breath of laughter was a breaking down of her self-control. Priscilla really was rather tearful for an instant. Then she lay back and took his arm; and Stephen rather awkwardly began to talk of other things to give her time for complete recovery.

"I knocked my hat when we went back from the church —in getting into the carriage. It furred it up all the wrong way. David says that's always done. I shouldn't think he would do it. I expect he was only comforting me. It was extraordinary that your father kept coming up to me and saying that he wanted to talk about Southey. He can't make up his mind whether he'll write a life of Southey or whether he ought to make me do it. He thinks I shouldn't be fair to Southey; but I believe he dreads wading through Southey's voluminous works. . . ."

"You'd better do it in collaboration," Priscilla ventured, drying her eyes and trying to speak in an ordinary voice. "I'm really ashamed of being so absurd, Stephen . . . so silly."

"You couldn't be that, my dearest." His not very successful attempt at off-hand forgiveness made her laugh again, so he went on: "Don't you worry about me, but let me go on talking."

"Does it do you good?"

"It's rather a relief. I mean, if you're miserable——"

"Not *really* miserable. Only rather dissolved."

"That's what I meant. You see, I never know what to do. There *are* men . . ."

"Oh, but gracious, Stephen! I haven't married men!"

"Am I doing all right? That chap might turn round, you know!"

Priscilla sat up very straight; but she still held his arm.

"Now I'm not going to laugh any more," she announced. "And I never really cried. I'm going to talk quite rationally. Do I look nice? Hasn't it been a splendid day! We shall get there in daylight. I suppose we're in good time."

They could see the shadow of the car, with their luggage strapped to it, whisking about away from them, now upon the road, now upon a vehicle as they passed it. Everywhere there was bright sunshine, hot and burning, and above them was the impenetrable sky into which, when they looked upwards, they seemed to be soaring towards an ever deeper blue. It was a day without cloud.

"Are you superstitious, Stephen? Do you believe in omens?"

He could see her delicately flushed face so near his own; her curling hair beneath the little tilted hat; her soft white neck above the sobriety of her grey travelling-dress. If he had believed in auguries he would have supposed her presence by his side, her loveliness, and the pure pearl-like beauty that seemed to him only a symbol of her intrinsic beauty, to be the best possible omen for the future. The day, the flawless early summer day with its sudden breezes among the thick strong leaves and the gathered dust of the roadway, was only a trifling part of his sense of the future. It was all part of the wonderful whole, the transfiguration, as he might have thought it, of his whole life. He did not answer her directly: she did not really care to know whether he was superstitious.

She wanted to know that he was as happy as she was, as exhilarated and confident. And that could be told better in his glance than by any words.

Their car sped through Kentish Town and Camden Town—gloomy districts that made Stephen think of his abandoned home—and down Hampstead Road and Tottenham Court Road to Charing Cross. They swiftly crossed Trafalgar Square with its steady sweep of traffic upon the eastern and southern sides; and passed down Whitehall into Victoria Street; and then, in a flash, they were within the station at Victoria, out upon the platform, hurrying, hurrying, to the train, to their carriage. And Priscilla was conscious of it all like an excited tangle of colour and noise and sensation—a misty bewildering marvel that was given sense and form only by her thrilling knowledge of happiness inextinguishable. The press of incident and emotion was too large, too overwhelming otherwise to have any meaning. She might even have been frightened with a sense of turmoil and strange experience if she had not seen Stephen, who had been hitherto a little constrained, soberly directing everything for her comfort. Though she hated tears, and ordinarily never cried, Priscilla knew that tears were in her eyes when she saw Stephen so concentrated upon thought for her. She loved him with passionate surrender. He was beautiful in her eyes, as a child to its mother. She was too moved for speech.

iv

The train jolted over the many points of the terminus and out across the broad river, and they could see other trains going and coming; and, upon the surface of the river, strings of barges and one or two rapid little motor-boats tuff-tuffing in and out among the heavier craft with a sort of sharp busyness that made Priscilla's eyes soften in a smile of pleasure. It was London that they were

leaving behind—to Stephen that overpressing home of twenty-nine years; to Priscilla that strange palace of delights that was still in her dreams of wider life a beckoning mystery. It was London, all that mighty power that she heard every day from her home in a far distant roar like the sound one hears in a sea-shell. And all the time their hearts seemed to beat with suffocating thickness and pain, as though they could not breathe; and every now and then they would turn from the dull houses and the occasional wide traffic-laden streets to look at one another with ingenuous candour. Stephen now sat beside Priscilla—which some self-consciousness that was not entirely selfish had previously forbidden him to do—his arm about her; so that she, lightly touching his breast with her shoulder, could feel his every respiration almost in accord with her own. It was remarkable to her that his breath should be longer and slower than her own: the fact aroused her curiosity and her attention. She felt, with a little quick surprise at the thought, which intruded upon her preoccupation, that they had never before been so entirely alone together; that the Stephen who was her husband was a new Stephen marvellously fashioned alike for her protection and her tender care. She was absorbed in her love for him, drowned in the sense of his beating heart and his slow, measured breathing. She saw his right hand upon his knee almost as though she had never seen it before, and for a moment watched, fascinated, the strong fingers that were so broad at the base and so strangely shaped and pointed. Their beauty was quite unquestionable, and even in her reverie she understood that it was wholly masculine, wholly unlike the beauty of a woman's hand and yet equally beautiful in its own right. It was not that she had been ignorant of these thoughts earlier; but she found that they were now insistently grouped and forced upon her consideration.

The train quickly sped through the nearer suburbs, where in many gardens there were children playing, and where washing was limply hanging to dry; where too they saw often only brown earth and the posts to which clothes-lines were intended to be fastened. Then came longer gardens, in which there were bushes and flowers, and wicker chairs in which girls sat, shading their eyes with their hands in order to look at the hurrying train. There was no washing here; but only a Sunday-afternoon sort of suburban trimness, rather placid and uncomfortably rigid. Then at last they came to the first fresh green of the nearer country, where pasture-lands seemed to fly into fields of fluctuating unripe grain and again to emerge beside the railway, filled with grazing cattle. For a long time they saw no sheep at all; but only cows and bulls, and sometimes horses that leapt or that flung up their heads as the train came abreast of them; and once or twice there were delightful ponies that scampered away across the meadows as if they had all their lives for sport and were driven irresistibly by a sudden impulsive friskiness as whimsical as the wind. With the same eyes Priscilla and Stephen saw everything they passed, sitting very still and silent, but intensely living and only glad to be thus together and alone. Priscilla felt surprised when once there stole into her mind a memory of the morning, of the church and the guests, of her mother and David and Dorothy—surprised to think how far behind this precious moment they all seemed; once, too, she startled herself by the wish that she and Stephen could always feel thus gloriously alone together, with their mood of content unchanged and unchallenged for the rest of their lives. There was as yet no need for them to speak. She was perfectly happy; she had no trouble, no doubt at all. Everything seemed to her to be perfect.

Then Priscilla began to wonder what Stephen was

thinking. It pleased her to speculate, to pretend that he must be thinking of her, or not thinking at all, but only as it were existing in the sensation of her nearness. How curious it was that they should both be so silent, and that she should feel such languor and inability to draw her mind away from these fancies! For one moment she was filled with the wish to express her thoughts—all her thrilling thoughts—as though for once she could say with absolute clearness all that she had always supposed she could never tell anybody. She had a longing to break down all these reserves; both timid and necessary, which all of us (except the merely liquid) guard with such jealous care. To say to Stephen, "This, and this finally and alone, is the real I!" It seemed to be a supreme need of her being—to say in some amazingly permitted speech of pure lucidity that which would for ever make Stephen's mind one mind with hers. It was a fantastic and an engrossing thought that filled and permeated her attention. If *only* she might once be granted the power of clear expression! The power to give herself utterly into Stephen's keeping! Then there could never be any misunderstanding, and she and Stephen would be one in reality. The train's quick jogging fell in time with her imaginings, and her dream seemed to take on a poetic rhythm. Stephen, Stephen, said the train, echoing her heart.

She wondered why he was quiet when her own impulse had turned so abruptly to the need of some self-clarification. It seemed as though she could never *begin* to talk; that from Stephen the first words, that should open their long, intimate record, must come. She turned so that she might see his face, and became conscious that it was so near her own that their cheeks softly touched; and Stephen, thinking that she wanted him to kiss her, turned also. And then it was that Priscilla felt again that there was no need for them to talk; that to be thus silently

beside him was best of all, and that words were only the baser measure of their untrammelled understanding. She was smiling with happiness, in a secret dream that she would never in all her life forget.

For the remainder of the month of June they had taken a furnished bungalow right up on the Sussex Downs, very nearly remote from ordinary habitations, satisfyingly compact and solitary. It was their prize, upon which Priscilla's thoughts had often gleefully exulted. The bungalow lay beyond the reach of any but the hardiest driver, up a bad road that was steep and wellnigh impassable; and upon this day they were for a few instants afraid that they had taken a wrong direction. Then at last, upon a plateau quite above the road, they saw the bungalow's white sloping roof, and its brown sides and the short narrow veranda which lay along the front of the little house. From that veranda, when they turned, they could see far and wide over all the lower land of the district—to the east to distinct heights as the down rose once more above the valley, to the north-east a sort of open weald along which they could see beautifully clumped trees and a mysterious distance. At the back of the bungalow the down rose steeply; less than half a mile to the west lay a fine thicket of trees in which on summer nights, they had been told, the nightingale sang. Everywhere they could see the soft warm contours of the downland, less green than brown, less brown than green, in the mysterious lights and shadows cast by the glowing sun and the fleeting clouds; mellowed by some native quality which they came to think most potent of all the influences that evoked its peculiar beauty.

And within the bungalow with its stained and varnished walls there was, in spite of every strangeness, a sense of home that made both Priscilla and Stephen thrill. This, then, was their home. Upon a common impulse they turned to each other in delight. The small room, with

its unknown furnishings and undiscovered limitations, was transfigured in their eyes. They might have been seeing now for the first time after a long period of blindness. Priscilla saw Stephen gravely smiling.

"Yes; but I wish you'd *say* it's perfect!" She heard her own voice with a sense of strangeness.

"But it *is!*" Stephen answered, in the same hushed tone. "And you couldn't make that more certain by boasting about it."

"It can't fade. Or do you think it might?"

Priscilla was taking off her hat—for all the world as if she had lived there for years. As if this were not their wedding-day.

V

The afternoon waned; the dusk gradually misted the distance and made the dim farther sky change to a shade that might almost have been mauve. Directly above, so clear was the air, the blue faded in tone but remained as deep, entrancing to the eye. As they stood upon the veranda they saw a star quite suddenly; and although for a time it seemed alone they found that other stars could quickly be seen, very pale in the pale sky. There was no moon; the new moon was not yet risen. Distant lights began to start up in the growing darkness, like sparks of fire to the seeking eye. Everywhere the day was dying. A low, soft breeze came from the sea, rustling the trees that were close to the bungalow. It seemed to Priscilla that they strained their ears to catch some other sound, to find stillness everywhere except where the leaves moved and swayed so pleasantly around them. The little wind cooled the air, and it was so very fresh and sweet that it gave to the air a new fragrance. She saw the sky deepening once more, to a blue much darker than any that is seen in the daytime, but still clearly a rich blue, untinged with grey. The stars were brighter, thickly clustered,

thicker and thicker, so that they hung bewilderingly and dazzled the eye.

"How quiet it is," Priscilla said in a low voice. "At home you always hear the same never-stopping noise of London. You know that everything is going on there. But here there isn't any sound. You expect to be able to hear little things running in the grass, and scampering. . . . It makes me feel rather frightened. Not frightened . . . I don't know. . . . Stephen, are you very glad you've married me?"

"Yes, dear." She could hardly hear him. "Very glad and proud."

"I'm a little frightened. Only for a moment."

"It isn't real. I'm very frightened too. But I know it isn't real. If we were really frightened we should hide it. We're only pretending to feel frightened. We're afraid to know our own happiness, perhaps?"

"Perhaps that is it. When we were in the train I had such a longing to tell you—something; but I never could think what to tell you. It was like a clamour. As if I could tell you about myself. Do you think it was sentimental? It was rather yearning. You're not . . . I know you wouldn't laugh; I shouldn't like you to be thinking of me as silly."

"Why should you ever suppose such a thing? It's like the impulse to sing or to dance. It's not—it couldn't be sentimental. It could only be that if we didn't really love each other."

"How *much* you know!" she said, teasingly, yet with her eyes gleaming.

"I only know from experience of myself."

It was like a revelation to her. How strange that she should have thought of him as passive, when of course he must be as impulsive as herself. She turned again, still rather overwhelmed by the recognition of his deep love.

"If I'm ever unjust to you," she said; "it's only through a momentary stupidity. I shan't ever really be blind for more than a little while. But I *am* blind. I'm ashamed to be blind, and so unjust."

"So are we all blind and unjust," he assured her. "If you say that, oughtn't I to say it? Because I'm much more stupid than you are, and very stubborn."

"You're not unjust."

She could feel his shrug, that sufficiently indicated his disagreement.

"Well, if you're ever unjust," he said, in a deep tone of amusement, "I'm to—what?"

"Tell me."

"Is that . . . Oh, Priscilla: you know that *that* wouldn't be any good!" His voice was rich with laughter.

"Then trust me and leave me to find out the truth."

Stephen hesitated for a moment before replying. Then he said quite seriously:

"Yes: I should think that would be the better way."

They continued in silence to look out from the veranda upon which they stood, and to watch the stealthy approach of night, until they were swallowed up in the developing darkness, close together, with quickly beating hearts, thinking, thinking . . . .as though they hoped to see in the pathless shadow some answer to their thoughts and some solace for their emotion.

CHAPTER X: THREE LETTERS

i

DURING the first long week at the bungalow Stephen and Priscilla made wonderful excursions over the Downs, sometimes east, sometimes west; and at other times southwards in the direction of the sea. They took their lunch on these occasions, and ate it in the shelter of little wayward bushes of gorse, or in the soft heaps of hay before a diminishing haystack. The wind swept always like a mild gale over the tops of the Downs, taming the burning heat of the sun and catching Priscilla's curls and her skirt in its progress. Often they saw flying rabbits, and watched birds hitherto unknown to them hopping and skimming low above their surrounding garden. They peered into dew-ponds with many sagacious reflections upon those treacherous legendary places, into which a child, and even a man, may unwarily walk and be drowned without chance of escape. Priscilla told of the naïve foreigner who, upon first seeing gorse, went down on his knees to worship the burning bush of God; Stephen with a map of Sussex, discoursed authoritatively (in his new rôle of antiquary) upon the local place-names, and how Steyning meant this and how Alfriston meant that, until they could have persuaded themselves that they were natives of the friendly county. They could have sung, with one of the poets who have ingenuously adopted Sussex as a kind of beloved stepmother,

I've given my soul to the Southdown grass . . .
Oh, Firll and Ditchling and sail at sea
I reckon you keep my soul for me!

—lines for which, whatever their intrinsic virtues, such lovers of Sussex as were these two lovers could never be too grateful. It was like a happy dream to them to wander upon the Downs on these hot bright summer days. Neither had ever been so happy.

And when they had been away a week they received their first letters, which were also the first reminder of the life they had left, to which they must inevitably return. Two of the letters were addressed to them jointly; the third, of a different character, was for Stephen alone. They came one morning just as the two holiday-makers were about to set forth upon a journey far west from their base. Mrs. Darnley, their charwoman, who lived half a mile away and miraculously did all the work in a couple of hours each day, besides coming in again to prepare the evening meal, saw the postman climbing in a sort of indefatigable stupor up the distressing hill. She called out the good news, and herself took from the postman his triple burden, upon which Priscilla pounced with an eagerness that was subtly not inconsistent with her perfect joy in their solitude.

"Two . . . three!" she cried. "One for you—two for both of us. This is from mother; and this from Dorothy. And yours . . ." She scrutinized the writing. "I don't know whom it's from; but it's a rather attractive writing. Just a very little shaky . . ."

Stephen took from her hand the letter she held out; and glanced at it while she turned again to the others. A slow frown gathered upon his brow and in his darkening eyes. He shook the letter slightly in distaste.

"It's from the old man," he said, doubtfully.

ii

Mrs. Evandine's letter was not a very long one, but it was full of her normal kindness. "My dear Children,"

she wrote,—"We have all been so glad to see how fine the weather is; and were delighted to hear that everything at the bungalow is perfect. We thought it would be. Dorothy is here with us, and is writing by the same post. You—Stephen—won't need to be told that she has been a great comfort to us since you have both been gone. Your father—this is Priscilla (really, it's more difficult than I thought to write to two people at once)—has been very busy writing an essay upon gardens, and has had Minch on the verge of madness during the whole of the week. I can't help thinking the subject of the essay was carelessly or recklessly chosen; but I have a suspicion that either David (for mischief) or Mr. Vanamure (through sheer innocence of heart) suggested the whole thing. Romeo, I'm sorry to say, has been inconsolable. He has miaowed all over the house, has sat for hours upon your bed, refuses milk unless it is actually held under his chin so that he hasn't to stoop at all, and is quite wretched. Poor old chap! We've told him in vain that it isn't for very long (I have consoled myself a little with that thought, though I don't expect that either of you will thank me for it); but it is so difficult to convince Romeo that we're speaking the truth. Write as soon as you are able to do so. We always hope for a letter from one or other of you in the mornings; but of course we realize that this is pure greed. Your loving Mother."

Dorothy's was much longer. It filled ten pages, and was so splashy and breathless in style that they were both forced to laugh. Dorothy was one of those letter-writers who are more colloquial in pen and ink than they are in practical speech. Her letters were always of the "Dear Jo: What-ho!" variety, and as those letters are always more interesting to the recipient than to the patient observer of literal meanings it would be unwise to present this one here. Dorothy confirmed Mrs. Evandine's

account of Romeo. "My dears. The poor thing's got the most awful rats. Sits about mopping and mowing all day long, and at nights roams the staircases. I heard an awful sound at my door last night. Got up in a panic and looked. Behold Romie. Walks in, humbly cringing before me. I felt *awful.* You can't console him. . . ."

"Oh, poor Romeo!" said Priscilla. "He must be very miserable!"

"He's in a bad way. I wish we could send him a message by a sure hand."

"I'm so grateful to you for not saying, 'Fancy all this fuss about a cat.' Until you've really had a cat and known its nature you never understand cats. You write ridiculous shallowness about them as Maeterlinck did. Even intelligent people—of course, not people with any imagination—think it's absurd to love a cat. They don't understand the reserved nature of cats: it alienates them just as reserved men and women do. They say—a dog—yes; but a cat! As if they knew!"

"They don't know Romeo," soothingly suggested her hearer. "Very likely that's the whole difficulty."

"Well, that's true. I admit he's unique. Dorothy writes very vividly, doesn't she! It's somehow a ramshackle, headlong sort of writing; but it's very characteristic and jolly; and it's splendid that she . . ." Priscilla hesitated . . . "doesn't complain of how much she misses you. I know how much that must be. And you miss her, I expect; just as I miss mother. Not bitterly; but in a pleasant, melancholy way. . . ."

"A kind of genial sense of discomfort?" he laboriously asked. Priscilla disdained to acknowledge his joke. She did not think a joke came naturally from Stephen; although she thought he could sometimes be rather wittily ironic.

"And all this time," she said, "there's another letter. Why, you haven't even opened it yet, Stephen!"

iii

The old man's letter was very different from both of the others. The writing varied between a polished clearness and what seemed to the cruel eye of Stephen a deliberate tremulousness. The tremulous writing was all, naturally enough, to be observed in the pathetic or emotional passages referring to his own health, state, and relation to Stephen: where the letters were distinctly formed the underlying meaning was of another character. The letter was in one sense a human document. As Stephen read, he seemed to visualize the old man sitting and writing it. He could call up so many things belonging to the past, incidents, impotencies, angers, as he read the lines and between the lines into the old man's soul. His cheeks grew pale and his eyes glowed. He was so evidently made savage with anger that Priscilla came close to him and put her hand upon his arm. Not knowing what he did he shook it off. It was the first rebuff; and Priscilla's lip trembled.

"Stephen—don't *read* the letter," she cried impulsively. "It's a bad letter."

He put up his free hand to check her. Then, for the first time recognizing her concern, he tried to smile reassuringly, to recover himself sufficiently to understand Priscilla's words. As if they were still impressed upon his hearing he was able by an effort of memory to call up the speech and comprehend it.

"Yes," he said. "You're quite right. It *is* a bad letter."

"Don't read it!" she again urged. He shook his head.

"I'd better finish it now."

"Then let me read it with you."

"No."

"But, Stephen!" She was aghast. Urgently she

began: "Surely I ought to know if it's something that hurts you? You know I'm to share——"

He did not hear her. He had gone back to the letter. Again his face had darkened. When his reading was finished he deliberately tore the letter into fragments, standing and tearing as if in making the scraps smaller and smaller he found some passionate physical satisfaction.

"Dear," he said at last, turning to Priscilla. "There are some things I must sooner or later tell you, that I don't want to tell you now. Only one is a secret thing. You can quite absolutely rely upon my telling you; but not now. And there is only one thing that need cause you any real unhappiness. The other things are only irritations. And the chief irritation is this wretched old man of mine. Sometimes I think he's purely wicked. Sometimes only a comic old rascal. Just now I think him wicked. I should like to tell you something about him; but I'm not going to do that, or even to think about him or his rascally letter, all the time we're here. Is that a bargain?"

Priscilla struggled with her fear. She was inwardly reproaching him, and before she could answer must conquer that impulse. She was deeply wounded.

"If you think it best," she said. "If you *must.*"

Stephen did not touch her, as she almost feared he would. Had he done so she might from sheer nervousness have repulsed him—have been driven into a few mortified tears. The sense of their intimacy, of their hitherto apparently unbroken confidence, had meant so much to her that the awakening was bitter, almost unbearable.

"I wish," Priscilla went on in a trembling voice, "I wish you hadn't seemed not to *trust* me not to read it."

"Oh!" cried Stephen. "How stupid of me! How stupid! But I never meant that, Priscilla. Don't for

a moment think such a thing. I never dreamt of it. Really." He began almost to look vainly about for the destroyed fragments.

Priscilla looked at him for the tiniest fraction of time. Then her eyelids flickered, so that the whole had seemed but a passing glance.

"Shall we go out now?" she asked composedly. Stephen searched her face for the truth.

"If you believe me," he said.

It had come to that! Was their beautiful happiness to be imperilled?

"I really believe you," Priscilla acknowledged. "And I'm ashamed of having thought that. It was unjust and it was stupid. I've never felt like this before; but, Stephen, I was mortified, and though I see there was no reason I can't shake off the feeling. I'm still, you see, mortified at not being . . . at not reading the letter."

He could not fail to recognize the perfect candour of her speech. It made him rueful. He was in two minds about the wisdom of explaining the whole matter. But his previously formed resolve governed him, and his impulse was subdued. He made a murmured protest.

"I'm so afraid the feeling will remain: that you'll find it there later."

"Well, you can tell me what the letter said." That was Priscilla's suggestion, made with a rather conscious smile.

"Would that do?" He knew it wouldn't. He knew better than she did that the destruction of the letter was a mistake. And it was the second mistake. "The only thing that mortifies you is the thought that you're not trusted. It destroys your happiness?"

"Don't let's talk any more about it." Bravely, Priscilla tried to check the whole little tangle. "We're taking it too seriously."

"But now we've begun . . ." he urged.

"Now it's done we're not to talk," she said. "You're

not to say any more. We're being stupid and serious. *You* are; *I* am. Both of us. Shall we go?"

She came to him and held her lips to be kissed.

"I perfectly trust you. You shall hear it all," said Stephen, before he accepted her forgiveness.

iv

The letter which had been destroyed was a long one. It covered much ground. It ran: "My dear Stephen,—You have thought fit to leave me in my old age to the care of strangers. You have with a ready hand also flung off your brother at a time when of all others he needs your help most. I cannot forbear saying, although it is clear to me that any words of mine can do nothing to turn you from the extravagantly selfish course upon which you are now in defiance of all humanity, common sense and indeed of common decency so recklessly embarked. In days gone by I have sometimes felt that I may have been unjust to you, since my preoccupations with other affairs have precluded me from giving as much attention as I should have wished in all good faith Stephen to the affairs of my home. Well, *mea culpa,* I have felt sorely that I have not given to your upbringing as much of that inordinate care which you have been pleased to dispose for the purposes of my inconvenience. But the result of my forbearance, for that is what it has been, to allow you to follow unchecked your own path to an individualistic and purely selfish happiness, has been well revealed to me in the past few days. Now that I am too old, too weak, to fend for myself in this weary battle of life, at a time when many men of lesser talents than myself are resting upon their oars while their eldest sons, glad to at length take some share in brightening the last years of loved fathers, devote some little time to the study of best pleasing and looking after the health and well-being of said fathers, it is necessary for me to still more injure

my health and well-being of their (*sic*) in order to scrape together some small emolument wherewith to add to the beggarly and contemptible weekly pound which you have *promised* to send for my support.

"When I think of what you owe to me, the many anxious nights when a child, the many toilsome hours when a boy and young man, when the whole care of the young family devolved upon me in all the dreadful time of the loss of my dear wife which you Stephen never realized as I did because you were lost in your deceitful and ambitious dreams of self-seeking marriage with a rich man's daughter in order that you might be carried to the topmost pinnacle of success though your father, your poor wretched father starve, I confess I am tempted to be cynical. In spite of all, and the rebuffs which my friendly and considerate interest in your work have earned for me from you, I have hoped that a time would come when such narrow egoism upon your part would soften in maturity to a feast of reason when at last you would appreciate the loving thought and care which your father has rendered gladly and yet not without close toil to make your character less rigid and closed to all wider feelings. But enough of this. I cannot without tears write the saddest words that perhaps man ever penned. Enough that I am sick at heart and in body, distressed by the occurrence and its inner significance in the history of our two lives. I write from a bed of sickness, and very sorrowfully, since my day is failing and my hand no longer can execute the labour which my brain can conceive. This, however, can hardly interest you, since you have left me without thought. Do I reproach you for this? Do I wrong you? Your heart will give you the best answer, or if not your heart your conscience.

"But another matter as grave, and in some eyes perhaps even graver, though as to that again I will not pretend in my mortal fallibility to be a judge, though I have my

own opinion, claims my attention. The other evening I had some conversation at a place in this neighbourhood which I need not too nearly specify with a man who has reason to believe himself, as I alas! have reason to believe him, though here again I write most unwillingly of matters which concern my honour, injured by you. That man is Henry Bayley. I think I see you flinch at that name. Mr. Bayley and myself met each other by accident, and Mr. Bayley, being in a mood in which he was most ready to confide to the ears of an honourable man such as I myself have sometimes believed myself to be, whatever my son may be, the sorrows and unfortunate vicissitudes of his recent life. Mr. Bayley, seeing that I was a just man, not given to *dishonourable practices* and not very likely either to condone such practices in others, even though he be my own son, confided to me his belief, his inexpressibly sad belief, that his wife, perhaps too trusting, perhaps misled, had been unfaithful to him. Of his grief I had no need of proof; for indeed the tears were in his eyes as he called me to witness, as I readily did, that he had been a good husband to her. I do not doubt that, for I have often seen Mr. Bayley on his way home on a Friday night laden with gifts for his wife of an edible variety. Therefore it was with sorrow that I gathered from Mr. Bayley that his wife and he have recently disagreed violently, and that she has as good as confessed her guilt, while Mr. Bayley has in his possession a most damaging letter in which Mrs. Bayley makes an assignation with her lover. That lover, my dear Stephen, both Mr. Bayley and myself fear against all our prepossessions and wishes to be yourself. We have spoken of the matter with the utmost delicacy I assure you, and in response to Mr. Bayley's confidences I have explained to him that what lends considerable colour to his view is the way in which I at the time when of all others, the time when a man is breaking up, need most care, am cast utterly adrift,

robbed of my daughter and of all the support to which I might legitimately have looked at this time.

"Now my dear Stephen, Mr. Bayley is under no illusions as to the nature of the evidence he has. He is not a vindictive man, and he understands (now that I have told him) that in all probability he could not get any legal redress for the wrong he has suffered. In the last resort perhaps he might be tempted to have recourse, though I have strongly interceded with him upon your behalf, to the processes whereby he might obtain that redress; but at present, on my earnest request, he understands that the evidence is not such as to carry overwhelming weight in a court of law. Nevertheless, as you will be in a position to judge, Mr. Bayley can hardly be expected to allow so serious a matter as this to pass unquestioned and without some suitable action. You are now, I know, on your honeymoon, and I can see that it would be a serious jeopardizing of that future success for which I fear you have been so ready to sacrifice the health and perhaps even the life of a parent if the news of Mr. Bayley's grievance should reach the perhaps more sympathetically considered (since they are wealthy) parents of your wife. I sincerely *hope it will not do so;* but if I should venture to offer with all humility my advice in a situation which to all parties is and may be so profoundly embarrassing, it is that you should let me hear what you are prepared to do within the next week. My dear Stephen it is with the utmost regret that I take the step of writing this painful letter—a letter which is to me so doubly, trebly painful; and I trust that what I have said may recall you to a sense of what is due to all those whom I cannot, seeing what is my own experience, but suppose you to have injured. And in that case the very blunt and straightforward issue arises—what are you going to do?

"I am your affectionate father, John Moore."

CHAPTER XI: EPITOME

i

PRISCILLA thought very often about the letter and about the scene connected with the letter. The thoughts sank into her knowledge and worked there like acid. It became clear to her that marriage did not transform two people into one person. She had always in reading novels about husbands and wives condemned as untrue all those (and they were the majority) in which it was quite obvious that husband and wife had met for the first time upon page one. How was it possible, she had thought, that a husband and his wife should be strangers to one another? How possible that all the intimacies of marriage should be shed at the first bidding of unkind circumstance? Her own father and mother understood each other so well that they never disagreed; their lives had been adjusted so many years before that at this date they were like perfectly responsive partners in a dance. It was not, she felt sure, that they had compromised, that they jogged along together in middle-aged disillusion, as gloomy writers seemed to suggest that middle-aged people must always do. That notion was impossible. And if her own mother and father "understood" and were perfectly adjusted in an intimate and no longer passionate love, why should the same not hold good with other married people? That was what Priscilla in her own mind had argued. Just as she had always been sure—she said "known"—that she would marry Stephen. It had seemed to her inevitable. And yet in her honesty she was bound to admit that it might only have been a hope to which she had clung from an

unutterable fear to face any alternative. That was a reflection that made her very soberly thankful.

For now it appeared that one could never be sure of anything. Either the comfortable life she had led at Totteridge had been untrue to general experience or she was infected with Stephen's detached scepticism about the ends and the measures of life. She had gradually, it is true, been made to recognize the reality of his point of view—a first step of more importance than it may seem to the casual eye. Where she had always been gravely irritated by that character in one of Thomas Hardy's novels who said that in the happiest moment the distance to sorrow was so short that a man's spirits mustn't—out of respect to his insight—rise higher than mere cheerfulness, she had now touched a kind of life in which such an attitude had its normal function, in which it actually was the only attitude possible to a self-respecting man. Priscilla knew that the life was harder and more exacting than she had expected, because her love for Stephen was stiffened by such respect and admiration for the quality of his mind that she felt his gravity to be both inexorable and just. For him gravity was right. But for herself? It was not that she found Stephen—as the old man and Roy had done—a repressive influence. Rightly or wrongly she loved him too well for that. She had said to him, after one of their arguments, "You're a discipline for me," and Stephen had answered, after a thoughtful pause, "I couldn't tell you what you are to me." She had suggested, "Perhaps a gnat?"

To which Stephen had replied with an exhaustive general protest against domestic deification. Priscilla, disposed to wish that Stephen had taken the matter less as a spur to one of his hobby-horses, and more with such a light acceptance as she might have expected from her complacent brother, patted Stephen upon the head. "My dear Stephen," she had retorted, "You're coddling your

vanity. You mayn't know it; but you *are*. Why can't you let everybody be pleasantly vain? You're only being puritanical——"

"I'm only talking about myself!"

"If I make a pie—which, thanks to Dorothy, I can proudly do—I expect you to praise it. I expect you to say, 'There's a clever little woman' (only don't dare to say 'little woman,' or I shall bite you). If you don't praise me, as well as eat my pudding—perhaps I should have said pie . . . I shall resent it. Be natural, child, and don't worry so much. What you must do is—unclench yourself. You're all clenched and gripped. I can see perfectly!"

And so their—to them so interesting—disagreement had continued, in a manner far too tiresome to be recorded. Nevertheless, all such discussions and all talks whatsoever went to mature Priscilla's mind. Her point of view had been so different from his, as her nature was so different, that the mere clash and encounter of their wits had led in her to rapid development. She could definitely look back to the Priscilla of a year before and see how much she had learned. It was not that she had changed: she had only developed. Yet she had cherished the belief that she and Stephen were in some way perfectly one. For a time she feared that they would always be two people—flint and steel, oil and water, that can never assimilate. She became aware of a barrier, which certainly—since her secret life was only a life of sweet dreaming—must have originated in Stephen's aloofness, his reserve, his native detachment. It must have been the consequence of that rigidity, into which he had been forced by harsh experience, and to which she had given the expressive but unpleasant description of "clenchedness." It almost seemed to her that this prevented him from receiving light and fresh nourishment. Against that idea, however, was the fact that he could sometimes

unbend, as he did to her, and allow to be seen the natural kindness of his heart. No reserve, finally, could conceal that. She came to the conclusion that the barrier was intellectual. Could she break down that barrier? In these days she was sometimes despondent of her power to do that, and fell into pensive reverie. When she became silent upon these occasions, Stephen seemed to look at her from his grave eyes as though he were puzzled and almost apprehensive. And all the time that Priscilla was conning her difficulty and remembering innumerable things that made her as often smile as dubiously shake her head, Stephen continued to observe her. At last one day he said a thing that startled Priscilla because it entirely changed the face of her immediate thoughts upon that subject.

"You know," said Stephen, impulsively, "you're still quite mysterious to me. Quite baffling."

ii

It sometimes happens that the simplest natures are in this way difficult to read—that the observer, involved in the complex fabric of his own mind, cannot put aside altogether these difficult mental processes and begin his task afresh with sympathetic naïveté. And it is imagination only that will help the male observer to understand the simple feminine mind, for no amount of intelligent deduction—such as will serve for political economy or physiological psychology—will in this case have any true value. Priscilla, half dreaming, not yet awakened, thought quickly and as it were in little eddies, all her dreams and her extraordinarily unrelated experience leading her to feel her thoughts rather than to think them. Upon the other hand Stephen, accustomed to subject his thoughts to a rigorous examination, and in

the habit of finding a reason for everything he did, had normally a strictness of judgment quite opposed to Priscilla's speedless certainties. Priscilla could see that his mind was acute and his judgment very rapid: she could see his sympathy, even in particular cases where its exercise had seemed to her to be unlikely, was often astonishingly true. She had asserted, as we have seen, that Stephen had imagination. But perhaps, as Priscilla sometimes thought, there are many different kinds of imagination? Imagination, according to Priscilla, was the particular quality that gives life and intensity and vital reality to the thing seen or invented. It was not to her, as it is to most people, synonymous with fertility of invention. She knew, however, that outside a certain range of probabilities Stephen's imagination was apt to dwindle (unless specially roused) to interest or intellectual curiosity. Therefore she did not contradict him when he said that he lacked creative power. That admission was certainly true. He did not see life in pictures or in any of the forms in which presumably it is visible to all artists. His view was no doubt akin to that of the scientist. But imagination, in her eyes, he as certainly had, and it coloured his actions: he was in no sense mechanical or merely groping among probabilities with the purblind manufacturers of opinion. But that imagination which springs out into ethereal rapture or joyous absurdity or even into the forms of art his rather exacting and destructive experience had perhaps atrophied. She could not tell.

Sometimes Priscilla divided imagination into the plain and coloured varieties. If that were possible, she would have put Stephen cheerfully among the plain imagination. She thought that might be a rather good and helpful division, if one could roughly allot to poets, as of course to painters of equal inspiration, the prismatic imagination, and to ideal novelists and dramatists a limited range

of colour (including, for once, black and white), and to —still ideal—critics a predominance of black and white with faint reflections and refractions of colour as subtly merged as the hues of the rainbow. Clearly her plan would not have applied to musicians, unless, as it has been mischievously alleged by those with a too fantastic colour-sense or a superfluity of time for the manufacture of theories, every sound has its corresponding colour value. Nevertheless, as no æsthetic theory will ever embrace all the arts, she had no hesitation in using such definitions as these for the purposes of her own private criticisms.

Priscilla thought that she read behind Stephen's disclaimers simply a reaction against the free assumption of imagination by all fanciful people and all people whose æsthetic culture is highly conventionalized or sophisticated, which is as much as to say all people who seemed to Priscilla to lack a prime originality of character. She thought fancy was often like skittishness—the artificially preserved naïveté of the child—and a palpable makeshift for something more ardently desired. She herself prized this originality above all things—the careless sureness of character which need neither imitate nor vehemently run counter to prevailing convention. It was to her defined by a wiser person, "feeling the ground sufficiently firm under one's feet to be able to go alone . . . it is the strongest possible feeling of truth; for it is a secret and instinctive yearning after and approximation towards it, before it is acknowledged by others, and almost before the mind knows what it is." That was where she found a point of absolute contact with Stephen, who also, without believing himself to be original, made that one quality the single touchstone of life and literature. So far, so good. But the other problem, of imagination, as it applied to Stephen engrossed her. Stephen himself engrossed her. She did not—as women are supposed to do—study

to please him: she was simply given over to the attempt to understand him, to reach the springs of his nature, an absorbing search. And it made her hold her breath with silent laughter to learn from his ejaculation that he was similarly engaged in trying to understand her. Surely they would both succeed? "Doesn't it seem pathetic," she announced in reply, "to think of us groping round each other like wrestlers by a sort of candle-light!" Stephen had merely frowned at her; but that was because he too was absorbed. Their rapture of association spent, they fell back thus upon the need for reimagining each other, as all whose perceptions of the world around them are not static are bound to be in constant process of doing, so that the chiaroscuro is always varying and newly colouring and merging in a way most magically interesting.

But it would have been too dreadful if this obsession of theirs, however pardonable in the newly revealed, had spoiled the Moore honeymoon. It did nothing of the kind. Their excursions went on, their days were swift and happy, their health and spirits were perfectly normal. And it was only when they rested that they became studious, and sometimes when they were talking that there flashed across Priscilla's mind some perception that startled her or gave her delight. She was always having such happy thoughts, and such plans. Her mind fed upon them. One led to another. Sometimes she was thrilling with glee at the pictures she had created. Stephen thought her plans invariably extravagant, and warily shook his head over some of them. "Oh, my dearest, not for *years!*" he would blankly say. "Your ideas of money are terrifying!" To which Priscilla would assuredly answer in a brief and all-sufficient rebuke: "You'll see!" She had made her plans. It was not for a man to swamp them with a cold douche, however frequently administered.

iii

What these plans were will be seen. They involved Stephen's worldly success, and his acceptance by all parts of the literary world as a critic of unquestionable originality. She did not want him all his life to write reviews for money; but she wanted his opinions to gain wide currency. As far as the thought of money went she knew that she had much to learn. She was afraid of her housekeeping. But that would come. Her preoccupation was with Stephen's status. For the securing of this she would have been prepared, if she had had money, to invest it in him, to do as the doctors do, when they set up at a loss for several years a big house in Harley Street from which to derive the kudos attached to the consultant's standing. She was ambitious to that extent and for that alone. Against her impulse to plan his career she had unwillingly to place Stephen's manifest opposition. He was willing to work for her; he wanted for her sake to attain an unassailable position; but he would not consent to be pushed into that position. David had unobtrusively done something in the way of introductions and commendation, with the result that Stephen's work had been lightened and made more remunerative in the past year. But his pride was enormous—if that were pride which well-wishers supposed to be obvious blindness to his own interests. He had to be helped without his guessing that he was being helped, and his perception was so acute that this was almost impossible. Priscilla sometimes, in plotting, felt herself a Machiavelli, until when she tried with the most cunning caution to open that path which should lead to the desired and so desirable end, Stephen, reading the whole, suppressed it ruthlessly with his very final "No!" He would stand alone. That was a knell to many a scheme dreamed out through the long winter preceding their marriage. Being young,

Priscilla—as Dorothy had done—failed to see that no good man can be driven from without. It was not enough that she should plan for him: she must all the while seem to trust in providence and in Stephen's own strength. She saw that he was like a child, and must do things by himself, even though a protecting hand should be ready to pounce upon his skirts in the nick of time to save him from falling. She gradually understood. "What children men are!" she thought to herself, never dreaming that her own dreams were childish. But she had learnt. She had really caught at the idea of her relation to Stephen.

That came soon after their engagement, before she had properly accepted realities. Then, during a talk, Stephen had made another thing clear—a thing that helped very much to mature her view. He had said: "If love were everything, the alchemy it is supposed to be, life would pass in a dream. So it can't be everything, can it! I don't think you and I ever pretend it is, though we regard it as a sort of essential key to everything. It depends on everything, running through it and carrying it, but horribly fragile all the time, and liable to fracture in any other calamity. . . . I'm so sorry to be obvious, dear. . . . It's all because I can never manage to say what I want to. What I want to get at is this. With me it's an instinct to work for you, to make a home, to adore you, and in the end to smother you with my own selfishness—to keep you to myself, to hate those who claim your affection or your notice. It's a common instinct. You see the consequences of it everywhere among the middling poor, where trivial jealousy is the chief matrimonial bond. You and I are wise enough to spot its activities and check them. On the other hand, I'm like every other ambitious young man. I don't know what's going to happen in my material life. I may succeed, or I may come a cropper. What Balzac said—I thought it

was horribly applicable when I read it years ago in his letters—was something like this: 'I want a woman who shall be able to be what the events of my life may demand of her—the wife of an ambassador or a mere housewife.' That's every ambitious young man's need—a wife who can entertain a Prime Minister or bear poverty and failure with stoicism. So many of them choose wrong—marry vulgar, pretty girls and suffer ever after, because wrong marriage destroys them. It makes me think how lucky I am; but it makes me realize that I've simply *got* to succeed, or everything's lost." Thinking of that, even as he spoke, he repeated with a sort of holy horror: "Absolutely everything!"

Priscilla had quickly said: "Not my love, Stephen!" And her extraordinary generosity in tolerating such a tirade—which after a few months he could not have uttered—had touched Stephen to the heart. He had stopped dead. He was not a common bore. It was simply that he was bent upon bringing everything directly within the scope of his intelligence. It might have been seen that he was inexperienced in love; for the experienced in love do not talk so, but leave their victims to find out the unspeakable truths of human tyranny. And as Priscilla also was inexperienced, it pleased her to hear him speak to her naturally and in the way in which she knew he must really think. She might have preferred another, more ecstatic manner: who could know that mystery? Certainly not Priscilla, who loved Stephen.

iv

She came to know a great deal about him immediately after their marriage that she could not have known before, when their meetings had been relatively short and seldom private. One thing she realized anew was his quietness. He was very quiet in everything, and had no need to

clatter or to talk. Also, when he worked he sat very still. Only when he found in a book something he detested—such as the rather mulish complaisance of old men towards dead authors—he exclaimed with disgust. It made Priscilla think of David, who sometimes carried a foolish book about with him, gloating with mischief over its foolishness and finding people to share in his glee as he had been in the habit of doing at the university. Stephen never did that. He did not need to share his detestations or his amusements, but only to expel them. He savagely cried out, and coldly condemned the bad book, exposing with unerring cruelty its flabby judgments, its mistakes of fact, its ridiculous deductions and inductions. Priscilla always felt sorry. There might not be much to choose between David and Stephen for charity; but Stephen's almost malignant coldness hurt her. She wondered whether it could ever be good so unsparingly to condemn the feebleness of others. One day she raised that point.

"You don't seem to agree with Mr. Pipps, Stephen?"

"Eh? No: he's a bad fellow." Then, with a smile, he asked: "Did I yelp? I can't help being angry when these chaps get so sentimental. Listen to this—from a man with a tremendous reputation. He's been quoting Spenser's line, 'The noblest mind the most contentment has,' and he goes on: 'What a noble line! the noblest, I think, in all literature. Let us commit it to heart, repeat it morning, noon, and night, and it will cast out for us all the devils, aye, all the swine of Pessimism.' Why, it's Pecksniffian, buzzing with hypocrisy; and I'm bound to say so, in sheer self-defence."

"I expect Mr. Pipps will be angry with you."

"Do you think so?" He thought for a moment. "If he reads it. I shouldn't wonder."

"Don't you ever think of the effect on others of what you say?"

"Do you mean on Pipps and his kidney? Well, it's a question of hurting them or encouraging them. I don't want to hurt. I hate hurting people. But if they're silly, oughtn't I to say so? I've got the truth to defend. Perhaps you think it's only my particular notion of the truth? Very likely that's true. But after all *they* come first. They come out with their feeble extension lectures, and get crawled over by the provincial papers. Besides, they've made ignorant people suffer. And they've taught them ineradicable half-truths. It's now time that their bad work should be checked."

"I was only wondering if there mightn't be a sort of vulgar, ready-made truth—as much as ordinary people can bear—in what they say. I shouldn't like you to be what they call an incurably 'superior' critic, far above human weakness."

Stephen shook his head. "Father always says that truth has many facets, and that even the fool ought to have his day."

"Oh, he does!" Stephen said dryly. "He's got it. I can't stop him from enjoying his power. But he claims to-morrow and eternity as well. That's more than I can stomach. And as for Mr. Evandine's compunction, that's because middle-aged men don't want to be troubled to say whether a thing is good or bad. You see, your father's a very kind man; but he's not a critic."

"But Stephen! He's supposed to be a beautiful critic!"

"Not a *real* critic. He's a delightful writer, and what you might call a delicate appreciator. He enjoys the bouquet of literature with a perfectly exquisite taste. But he's got no more grasp of *literature*—no more sense of its reality—than that chap Agg that David's always exploiting."

Priscilla gave a serious little nod. Her comparative observation had not been idle in the last year.

"I know it matters a great deal," she said. Their glances met, not unhumorously, although both honestly felt that it mattered to them more than most things did.

"It does, I assure you," went on Stephen. "Men like your father are responsible for establishing a canon. According to them nothing later than 1850 is literature; but everything previous to 1850 is to be treated with exactly the same seriousness. It may be Prior or Langland or Miss Edgeworth or Shakespeare or Milton or Parnell or some discovery never remembered before. They've all to be merged in a sort of flat equality, and to be dipped into for essays and fancies as one dips into a bran-tub. It's not true. Our business is to get out of all history and art what we constructively need—what has a real original value—and send the rest shuffling into oblivion. But you find men claiming to be literary critics who are mere word-counters, and people who dribble over musty old eighteenth-century books quarrelling over whether this mouldy thing is to be preferred to that other mouldy thing. When both ought to be in the dust-bin, and the scavengers along with them. It's the same everywhere, of course. The impulse to hoard everything—dirt, rags, diamonds, wretched crusts, and so on. It's all common enough, wherever one looks. I'm inclined to think that art criticism and musical criticism *may* be better: I mean, there are really a few people biting into the truth. But in literature—no. Look at the critical papers. Where are their standards? One column contradicts another. There's no attempt to grapple with a subject, or to grasp the essential parts of it. There's no room, for one thing. You can do nothing in a thousand words. You want ten thousand. And even so you've *got* to write readable articles that nod and beck with courtesy and compliment and a beastly sort of mediocre conventionality."

He paused, exhausted by his harangue.

"Oh, but Stephen!" interrupted Priscilla, alarmed by his vehemence. "What are *you* doing?"

"Exactly!" he cried in triumph. "I'm setting an example. And as I'm very conceited I make a great song about it and a martyr of myself. It's quite perfectly clear."

"Well, it's very interesting; and it seems to me very plausible. I suppose when people get together they all fall into a mist and conspire to tolerate each other's frailties, and that everybody gets frailer and frailer and more and more tolerant and winking. But I should like to hear you talk about it to father."

"I have done so. He says I shall grow more tolerant. I've told him that I suppose I shall lose heart. How many must have done that!"

"But Stephen: this is what I want to know. Do you really *mean* all this, and does father mean what he says? If so, why doesn't one of you convince the other one? If one of you is right. Or is it a game? Or is one of you blind? Are you convinced? I can't understand why if a man proclaims truth he shouldn't be blowing a sort of last trump and tumbling down all muddleheadedness for ever. Is there any *truth* in it?"

"In the tirade?" questioned Stephen. "Oh, it's true. Bitterly true. Except that I make it seem as though there's a conspiracy against truth, when it's only a lack of the scientific spirit. Your father and I, like all men who disagree, from politicians upwards, are simply talking about different things and vilifying and misrepresenting one another to support our own clamour. He says I'm a puritan: I say he's a latitudinarian. Now this is a very interesting thing. There are certain men—contemporaries, we'll say—whose work I detest. I see absolutely no virtue in it except perverse skill. Sometimes not even that. A year ago, before I met David,

I detested the men as well. Never having seen them, of course. I thought they must be frightful cads and poseurs. Now David has introduced me to some of them. They certainly detest me as I do them—think me ill-bred (what Colvin, insufferably talking about Keats, calls 'under-bred'), and so on. But they're curious to see what I'm really like—look at me through their eyelashes and when other people are talking to me. And I find they're extremely nice fellows, kind, courteous, and as generous as possible—really keen to see good and to praise good work even though they don't approve it. Not all of them, but most. I admire them very much. When I'm there I think we're all part of a formidable body fighting for reality. Yet away from me, buried in their stuffies, they're capable of writing blind, ignorant, rancorous, splenetic rubbish—sheer dislikes bolstered up with disingenuous humbug. You see what I mean?"

"You seem to mean," Priscilla ventured, "that if you were *always* their tutor they'd reform, and say what you think."

"I really mean," he proceeded to explain, frowning at her levity but giving otherwise no sign of impatience, "that they're self-important as well as ignorant sentimentalists. When they talk they can be as modest and as candid as anybody could wish. When they write they have to remember their canons, and their commitments, and their reputations, and their likes and dislikes, and their feuds, and the feuds of their friends. . . ."

"Upon my word!" Priscilla said. "I don't wonder they relapse if you tell them home-truths of that sort. I expect their modesty and candour is a mask for resentment. That was what I was wondering—if you weren't rather harsh, Stephen. . . . If you don't blind them to your rightness by your own intolerance. I don't suggest you're not right. I think what you say is always very convincing. And yet sometimes I'm unwillingly con-

vinced. I mean that I can't answer it; but that I wish I could."

Stephen gave signs of satisfaction.

"That's because you're honest, my dearest. You don't like logic, but you recognize its validity in criticism. These men aren't quite honest. Don't you see, their minds slip back into their old grooves the moment they're alone. I can see the jealous looks they cast on their paper while they're writing. And so they go on adding to the confusion by writing their own impulsive apologies for inaccurate judgment, so that everybody can find an authority to support his own bad taste. That's why the average man is ignorant and opinionated about literature. All the professional critics are perverting his judgment through sheer ignorance and dread of innovation. Their minds are sealed against contraries. They go on with their tedious babblings. . . . God forgive me, I do it myself!" He was aghast at his own discovery.

"But then of course you're right!" urged Priscilla, with what women suppose to be irony.

"But then of course I'm right," asserted Stephen, in a grave voice. "Still, you see the difficulty, and the harm men like your father can do—who say, 'we're all as good as one another, and I'm the true fount of wisdom.'"

"I'm afraid I see that I have a very conceited man for a husband," Priscilla said. "But, my dear, I'm quite sure he can hold his own with the others, who are quite as conceited and not so honest."

Stephen was thoughtful for a time. At last he said:

"I admit I'm conceited. I don't mind being conceited, because it's a healthy state. But I don't like you to think me conceited."

"That's because you don't know what you want, Stephen. You don't want me to adore you, and you don't want me to think you conceited. You want me to love you very scientifically; and it can't be done. You

want to dictate to me the way I should think of you, and it's foreign to me."

He acknowledged the truth of what she said.

"Yes. I want everything my own way. I admit it. I'm impatient, and that means I'm unjust."

"You're also rather cruel."

Stephen thought for some moments over that accusation. It made him think of Minnie Bayley with a natural but perhaps a rather cold-blooded detachment.

"You don't mean, to you?" he presently inquired.

"In criticism." It made his brows lift. "You don't realize that your normal way of thinking of things isn't everybody's way; and I think that people who don't realize that you criticize yourself quite as unsparingly just have their enthusiasms corroded, and nothing given them in their place. You take the heart out of them, Stephen, with your love of a rather frosty truth."

This was plain speaking! But Stephen was deeply interested, and was not at all concerned with the purely personal aspect as it might have affected his vanity.

"Do *you* find it so?" he asked. "I mean, as far as your own feeling goes."

"No; you're kind to me. I'm only thinking of the effect on others. I wouldn't have you—to me—one little bit different. You know you're everything to me. Oh, Stephen, I'm rather tired of this talk, though I do think it's very interesting. I feel I'm not wise enough to challenge you on your own ground, and that you have to be considerate to me. But I think a lot about this; and I wish you'd be more tolerant of conventional stupidity; because that seems to me pitiable rather than anything else. And you seem to think it criminal. I should have thought you must be wrong in simply attacking it."

"You can't reform by pity, dear. All sorts of people must have tried."

"You must follow your own course." She spoke hesitatingly, as though the admission was forced.

"Once you shrink you fall among conventions. They're like gins. However, we'll leave it at that. I'm glad we talked. I like to know exactly what you think."

"I wish I could tell you!"

"Do you mean that what you think is worse than you can say?"

"The idea! You know how impossible it is to talk your thoughts. What you say is only the skeleton of what you think. And in this there's so much one can't express. In everything, for that matter. I wish I could express myself. That's what everybody wishes, I expect. I envy all artists very much, because they're expressing themselves all the time, like the skylark and the nightingale. . . ."

"And the donkey and the peacock, no doubt. I expect they're only skeletonizing."

They both shook heads lugubriously at the notion of this fundamental shortcoming. Then Priscilla began to laugh; and although Stephen was not in the habit of laughing he also, as he returned to the book which had provoked this colloquy, allowed a smile to steal into his eyes and to soften them. His glance at Priscilla was one of amusement, but it was also one of gratitude. She, with a curious feeling of exhilaration, rose to prepare their little supper. Stephen, for his part, thought that possibly artists were those who deliberately—and not involuntarily—skeletonized.

V

At last they came to the end of their honeymoon, and with rueful hearts watched the last day coming nearer and nearer. As if to show sympathy with their spirits, but in a blundering way, the weather took a turn for the

worse; and instead of bright days that grew more intensely hot until the sun began to decline there came days when south-westerly winds brought clouds and gushes of rain and sudden gusts that tore like storms among the trees by the bungalow. The change was unlooked-for, and it intensified their gloomy sense of approaching loss. They would go to the streaming back window and look across a turnip-field to the soaking down; they would look to the northern lowlands and see nothing but a sheet of falling rain so fine that it might have been a mist.

To add to their discomfort there came from the old man—two days before the end, when the weather was April-like in its uncertainty—a second menacing letter, which Stephen held up to Priscilla before destroying it.

"My father is trying to bring himself to my notice," he said. "This letter is going to be destroyed unread. I only opened it in case the old man had returned his postal order. But the old man, although he's a kind of Irishman, has a great fund of prudence."

"You always speak of him with dislike; but you never tell me why. Dorothy is much more illuminating."

"Yes. She would be."

"Dorothy says he's one of the worst."

"You see what a shady family you've married into." There was bitterness in his tone; not at what he was saying, but at the thought that prompted the speech.

"One day I expect you'll tell me why you dislike the old man. And I should like to know what you have done about Roy, though I've hardly ever seen him."

"Roy," said Stephen reflectively, "is a difficulty. It's true that he's at what's called (by the old man) a dangerous age; but all ages are very dangerous. Roy's in a city office getting fifteen shillings a week. He's not worth more, and he doesn't seem to show any special aptitude as yet. I shall see him pretty often, of course; and I'd like him to come and live near us, but not with

us. By the way, it's cleared off a bit, so we might start?"

They put on light coats and went out, Priscilla's arm in his, tightly locked to withstand the staggering breeze. The sky had partially cleared, and showed a lovely blue behind hurrying clouds. They plodded up a greasy path, feeling the air in their lungs, and hearing a sudden venturesome skylark thrilling as he mounted above them into the incomparable blue. Both were conscious of a fresh exhilaration, an impulse to fly.

"Yes . . ." resumed Stephen, who was tenacious of memory. "We were talking—or rather, I'm afraid *I* was talking—about Roy. You see he's too old to be looked after, and not quite old enough to look after himself. And he's not particularly stable."

"Dorothy says she knows more about him than you do," panted Priscilla, checking him upon the hill so that she might recapture her lost power to breathe. "But that she can't express it. She's said that more than once."

"Yes. Dorothy guesses a lot, and she's awfully quick. So very likely she does know more. He's quite an attractive boy, don't you think? Granting that his voice is hoarse and his fingers nicotined."

"I thought he was very nice; but as if he weren't very happy."

"I don't think boys ever are very happy at his age. You see he's drifting; and he's just becoming seriously conscious of his sex. He's half a man, but he knows that he's still a kid. Also, he probably wants to go to theatres, to bet, to have a bicycle, and smoke and drink and dress smartly—and he hasn't got the money to do it with. If the old man had any moral sense Roy would have all these things."

"Is it worse for Roy than it was for you?" Priscilla asked, rather defiantly.

"I say, isn't that beautiful! But it looks as if a storm

was coming." For a moment they stopped, breathing hard after their struggle with the hill and the wind. He had drawn attention to the remarkable sweep of the blue-grey clouds that were rushing towards them from the south-west. The clouds seemed to be carried by an irresistible wind, and those that were nearer the earth were torn into dispersed fleeces or absorbed into the larger mass before the eye had properly seized their earlier relation. The Moores slowly pivoted, so that they could see, a very little way below them, the white roof of the bungalow against the wan grey-green background of down and field and tree. Then Stephen, reverting to their talk, went on as they stood there in a temporary shelter below the top of the down, which was besieged by the tumultuous winds, "I shouldn't like Roy to have the time I had, because I can never understand how I lived through it. I must be very strong, and even so I feel as though it had spoilt me. . . . That's what you mean by intolerance. It has so eaten into my bones that I can't help hating with a profound hate all those who take the poor for granted, and legislate accordingly. I hate the governing class in England, with its vile democratic professions, so much that if there were a civil war between workers and legislators I'd give my life for the workers as the one possible thing. Because though I suffered myself it was never that that destroyed me, but the suffering of Dorothy and Roy—the hideous uselessness and aimlessness of the whole business. However, you don't want to hear my mouthings on such things: they're particularly out of place on a honeymoon. What I was going to say was that Roy's had quite a bad enough time as it is. In me it was bitter, but it was toughening. I'm all through, though I admit that the consequences may be bad, bitter with hatred of things I dislike. Roy simply doesn't understand. He knew what it was when I couldn't give him any bread, or when we made soup for

three out of a penny packet of desiccated vegetables (I suppose it was vegetable, at least); but he wasn't made to think, as I was, that in a democracy such a state of things ought never to exist. He took it for granted. And of course my half looking after him has been a mistake in one way, because it's undermined his self-reliance without giving him anything in place of it—any standards, I mean. He's had a little more education than I had; but it's only a pseudo-education, that has confused his mind instead of training it. And it had to be done on a parrot-system that gives way immediately the particular rote is interrupted, like loss of memory in playing drama. It's when I think that he *might* have been of use to the community that I feel so savage. I'm not only selfish, really. But there is talk—always among academic sociologists—about the debt of every man to the State for its protection; and that seems to me to be such cant. The State never protected Roy. I protected him, and I had such poor opportunities that of course I made a mess of it. Protecting his body, I couldn't—even if I'd had the sense to do it I hadn't the time—I couldn't train his mind. Besides the old man was a horrible influence."

Priscilla listened with great attention as he spoke, her eyes lowered and her head bent. She knew he must be telling her thoughts long hoarded, thoughts that were the result of his real experience; and what he said helped her to understand a little more of the life that had made him what he was. She said thoughtfully:

"Stephen, dear: all you say moves me very much. You know that as far as I can understand I do sympathize —though I admit what you've always said, that nobody who hasn't been through it can quite realize what that kind of hardship means. But it seems to me that it has very likely made you all very loyal to each other. Dorothy said Roy was very fond of you, for example. I thought that meant a great deal."

"It's only that the old man was the common enemy. That drew us all together. Poverty doesn't draw people together: it pinches and warps them. But it draws people together to suffer from some outside force. Poverty is a bond that binds poor people together against rich people —or sufferers against the selfish. We had to protect ourselves and suffer the old man. Nowadays the old man pets Roy—praises him at my expense—and so Roy is drawing away from me. I wish I could keep him; but I can't preach at him and say the things he wants are bad. And he doesn't seem to have any enthusiasm that I could reach him through. He's made his own friends, sees the old man well dressed and very likely better-tempered than I am. It's only natural that he should go obstinately in his own courses. But I'm sure he's got character if it were given a chance."

"I wonder if I could help," said Priscilla, thereby taking the first step to Roy's salvation. "Don't you think it's the sort of thing I might do?"

"You shall," returned Stephen emphatically, struck by the idea. "It's a splendid notion." After a pause he resumed in another, almost appealing tone, like an apologetic boy: "He's one person you must help. There's another also . . . that I should like you to help. And yet . . ." He faltered. "I expect it's impossible."

"Oh, tell me!" Priscilla, flushed with the thought of usefulness, pressed a little closer, looking up into his face. Stephen averted his eyes, looking fixedly at the horizon.

"Later. Not now. It's a woman. I'm afraid it's unthinkable. I wish to goodness I knew more about human nature. . . . Phiou! Here's the rain again!" His voice had almost a tone of relief. His face, upturned to the clouds and the wild slanting rain that had begun to pour down upon them from a sky of level grey, was much lightened. "Hurry! It's a storm! Hallo, look at that chap down there. He must be drenched."

They hurried, watching as they ran the man whose path would presently join their own. He was a tall fellow in a Norfolk jacket and grey flannel trousers, and the rain had absolutely soaked his clothing, which clung in a black hideousness to his legs and shoulders. He had evidently met the storm early, and continued in its pressing company. They could see his light-coloured socks all soaked and splashed with mud, and his cap heavy with wet.

"Shall we shelter him?" Stephen asked. "This is a soaker, and it's going to keep on."

"If you like. He looks attractively dauntless. But he'll need a change of clothes," warned Priscilla, who now knew all about Stephen's not very exhaustive wardrobe.

"I'll lend him my blue serge. He's in distress."

"I wonder if he'd agree to keep it!" Priscilla laughed, as though that thought was too good to be true.

"You don't seem to like my clothes," grumbled Stephen. "To me they're old friends."

"I feel they're rather stickers, Stephen. Barnacles. Time-servers. I think they ought to be pensioned, or superannuated." Priscilla, warmed by the run, and stung by the wind and rain, felt perfectly naughty.

"Well, shall I? He's getting very near now."

They looked for the first time scrutinizingly at the bedraggled man, who now strode so much nearer, making use of a heavy, polished walking-stick to keep his footing on the slippery road. He was very erect and well built, his shoulders thrown back against the pelting storm. He was very fair, and deeply tanned, as from outdoor life.

"Oh, Stephen! It's Hilary!" gasped Priscilla, almost stopping, and tugging Stephen's arm. It was too late to withdraw. They were carried right on, sliding on the soil, and keeping upright only by great effort.

"Can you tell me——" called the man, looking up

through the rain to where they scrambled upon the slightly higher ground above the rough roadway. His eyes were keen and bright, like those of a hunter or a soldier, and his white teeth glistened like polished ivory.

"That settles it. We must!" said Stephen, under his breath. "Hello! I say!"

"Oh dear me, oh dear me!" whispered Priscilla to herself, for this instant a coward.

"What's his surname? . . . Hallo, Badoureau!"

"Moore! Priscilla!"

The recognition swept over Hilary Badoureau—the recognition and the meaning of their presence together and in this place. The shock was obvious. His teeth met sharply.

"We're just home," said Stephen. "You must come in and dry yourself."

"No . . . Really no. Thanks very much. How——"

"Please!" Stephen, by such means silencing every protest, whether polite or profound, led the way through the trees to the bungalow.

It was all so quick and casual that he might have been a neighbour whom they slightly knew. In silence they trudged through the dripping asparagus-fern that spread out across the pathway in unchecked luxuriance, and out into the surrounding roughly planted garden. At the door of the bungalow Stephen halted to allow the others to precede him.

All the time Priscilla had not spoken. Her heart had begun to beat faster. She could not speak; she only knew that this meeting was fateful and that she would have given much to avert it. She was passionately thankful that Stephen showed himself as completely master of the situation. She saw that, whatever happened, he could keep his head and behave with dignity. The impassivity of both men was a source of secret wonder to her. She had never seen men in danger, never seen enemies meet,

or friends after a long parting, or she would have been more ready to understand that men—and women no less—have generally, unless they are of the few cowards, self-command when it is essential. She followed Stephen with her eyes even while she removed her mackintosh and little woolen hat.

He led the guest to the bedroom, came out again, returned with water, and re-emerged with portions of Hilary's clothing, which, with methodical precision, he proceeded to wring and to array before the kitchen fire so that they might dry.

It was Priscilla's part to lay the table for tea. It was extraordinary that Hilary should be her first guest! Anxiety regarding his personal attitude was lost in her pride at being a wife and hostess. Her genuine self-respect was involved in Hilary's sufficient entertainment. Be sure she felt very housewifely, and with a quick eye saw that all was in place, while with her quick mind she surveyed the whole question of the meal with the swift decisiveness of a great general and a young housekeeper.

vi

"I don't know why it should be an impulse to give drowned people tea," Priscilla said as Hilary appeared—seeming, as it were, to stick out of the famous blue serge suit. "But it's always done, and here it is, all poured out. Sit down quick!"

"Thanks. This is a perfect haven of refuge, and jolly cosy! It's splendid of you to look after me like this!"

As he took the cup Hilary threw back his head. He still drawled a little, the sweep of his brilliant yellow hair was the same; yet he was different, as Priscilla instantly saw. There was no constraint in his manner. If there was any change there it was in the direction of greater ease. She thought his eyes might be sterner, but they had

always had a rather frosty brightness. They looked very straight and boldly—not, as Stephen's did, as if they were penetrating the surface and obeying some reflective impulse, but as if they marked Hilary's confidence in his power to take and to destroy. That was the impression of his mouth also, which was both full and firm, the lips often drawn away from the teeth in a set smile which did not extend to the eyes. She thought him improved, very manly.

"You got rather caught, didn't you?" Stephen asked.

"Yes." Hilary's attention was now turned upon his successful rival, his mouth still smiling and his head thrown back in a conventional assumption of interest. "Started out to walk from Brighton to Eastbourne over the Downs. When one's started there's no chance of picking up a train anywhere."

"One of the tumbrils," suggested Priscilla.

"Oh, the omnibuses? Are they running? I must have seen one or two of them. Thought I'd rather walk. How's David? I've been out of England since February."

"Where've you been?" Priscilla realized that he must regard this stumble across them as a contretemps. "David's well enough."

"Italy in the spring—Tuscany. Then I went up to Venice and into Austria. Back through Germany. I went from Vienna to Leipzig; but Leipzig's a dull place —not half so ripping as Dresden, d'you think? Where you go hat in hand to see the dullest painting in the world." He turned to Stephen, who shook his head to show that he had never been there. "Well then from Leipzig to Berlin and through to Brussels. I've been wandering about in Flanders—among all those beautiful old towns—Ypres and Louvain, and so on. Jolly interesting—what? Then through the North of France to Paris and Havre. Southampton, and to the Isle of Wight —Pettigrew's; came along the Channel in Pettigrew's

yacht (you know Pettigrew, Priscilla? He was up with David and me) . . . yes, as far as Brighton. And here I am. Five months away. I've got an aunt at Eastbourne. I'm not sure if she lets lodgings there . . ."

"Poor boy: he's nervous," thought Priscilla, at this execrable attempt at a jest. Aloud she said: "We're going back to London to-morrow. We've got a cunning little cottage in the highest part of Hampstead. You can't get such things as a rule, so we're very triumphant. It's terribly small; but it's perfectly charming. You must come and see it."

"Thanks, awfully." Hilary brightened. That was her forgiveness. How kind she was! "It's frightfully nice of you."

Stephen's face fell. He almost shook his head. Priscilla could see him.

"Tea, Steve?" How malicious she became! The diminutive worked on Hilary and reduced his elation. He hastened on in order to stamp out from his consciousness the thought of that endearing abridgment.

"How's David? Wasting his time?"

"He *says* he's very busy. Apparently his firm is inundated with manuscripts. He claims to read most of them."

"Poor chap! See, *you* write, don't you?" Hilary turned again to Stephen, with an air that suggested that he strove condescendingly to notice his host and to assume a quite unthinkable interest in his works.

"Yes, thank you. Can I pass your cup?" Stephen's mouth was grimly smiling. He was determined not to be patronized, even by a guest. "And where else have you been? Did you go to Munich?"

"No. I went to Prague. They say that in the guidebooks the Germans and Austrians deliberately damn Prague as insanitary, so that people won't go there. It's perfectly beautiful. Pretty mean, isn't it!"

"But I thought it was a part of Austria?" Priscilla asked.

"Yes; but it's in Bohemia first; and the Czechs are Slavs, you know. They're one of the parts of the Monarchy that keep the Teutons and the Magyars on the go. Austria-Hungary's full of Slav patches and hostile races. I can't help thinking it'll blow up some day, for that reason."

"D'you mean a revolution?" asked Stephen, appreciatively.

"I should think so. Simply disintegrate. The Czechs are a wonderful people. It's a scandal to see them hemmed in as they are. . . ."

"Isn't Austria the place where there are all the Court scandals?" asked Priscilla. "I can't help thinking that Ruritania was really in Austria. And all these principalities in books. It must be rather a wicked place, I should suppose."

Hilary and Stephen exchanged an amused glance, and both stiffened again, like dogs that suspect each other.

"You say you're going to Hampstead?" Hilary inquired, turning to Priscilla.

"We shall be within reach of mother and father; and handy for town. We shan't belong, I should think, quite to the Hampstead intellectuals."

"Ah, one hears they're rather weird. Curious how a place gets full of people of one sort. Chelsea, now."

"Stephen refused to live there. He's rather ashamed of Hampstead. I don't know whether it's because he despises the Hampstead intellects or because he thinks they'll look down on me. I suppose they're really very decent people."

"Those little decencies you know—the little Clodds —live there, don't they?"

"Ethel was one of my bridesmaids."

Hilary winced: but his smile continued.

"Well, they're in the Hampstead group, aren't they? Typically decent people, but perhaps living at Hampstead doesn't necessarily demoralize you into decency. I've met that chap Skeffington who lives there. *He* seems quite indecent. The man that writes lugubrious novels where the hero prowls about the Heath at all hours of the night."

"Do you know *him?* Oh, do bring him to see us. He's Stephen's favourite—only—novelist."

"Is he a young man?" Stephen asked, suddenly interested. "I *have* rather liked his work. I don't know about its quality; but I think he knows what he's describing."

"About thirty? They're all that, you know. It's the age. There are three ages, according to David. No, four. Twenty-three, thirty, forty-five, and seventy-two." Hilary laughed as he ticked them off. "Skeffington's a rather eagly, facetious young man, with an immense tongue that wags at both ends. A huge voracious talker. I think I've only met him with David. I only mentioned him because I knew he lived at Hampstead."

"Well, bring him to see us!" commanded Priscilla. "Simply because we'd like to see him."

Then they talked of other things, until tea was finished and Stephen went to look after the drying clothes. He found them still clammy. The wind was whirling and moaning about the bungalow, rattling the cowl on its chimney; and the rain had gone. The evening was greying the sky, and the distances were all misty. He came back into the sitting-room, and Priscilla was sure that he felt a thrill when he saw Hilary sitting there in his blue serge suit. The suit in any case looked so careworn and shiny; and Hilary looked so absurd in it, so like the pictures of Oliver Twist or Smike with their heads and wrists and ankles stretching far out of insuffi-

cient garments, that Stephen's grim expression could hardly fail to be softened by a kind of bitter sympathy.

"Another hour," he said. "Do you smoke a pipe?"

"Thanks, no. I've got cigarettes in my coat. At least——"

Priscilla also noticed that Hilary's speech, when addressed directly to Stephen, was more curt and less considerate than his speech to herself. She did not like that, but she excused it on the ground of unsuccessful jealousy. Yet she thought that he had been once or twice deliberately impertinent, and that Stephen's behaviour throughout had been markedly superior. Perhaps there was a reason for that also?

She was to learn that reason after Hilary's dry departure. He was full of gratitude, and promised to bring Skeffington to see them at Hampstead as soon as possible. Then, once more in his Norfolk coat and flannel trousers, he swung out of doors with Stephen, who was to show him the way to Lewes.

Priscilla slowly cleared away the dishes and piled them ready for washing up. She and Stephen would do that work together upon his return, and make nothing of it. It had been very curious to see Hilary again, and to remember, as his presence had made her do, the happenings of a year ago. She had been so much younger then, and was now so much older. She thought she was also so extraordinarily much more happy, in spite of the fact that those days had been superficially happy and full of delightful occupations. She had very much liked to lie in the hammock and to hear Hilary and David lazily talking to one another, and to her. Well, those days were gone . . . one couldn't, however much one wanted, combine one's various happinesses. The strongest impulse drove one forward, and the lesser impulses resolved themselves into pleasant or melancholy memories, and dreams of what might have happened. . . . It was very

nice to be reconciled to Hilary. He had been stupid, insulting. She no longer respected him as she had done. But there were extenuations. She must not forget that. Poor Hilary! And yet why should she say that? He had everything, when Stephen had nothing. Hilary had always had money and care and friends. Stephen had none of these things. Yet Stephen was the better and the richer . . . and the more modest. Stephen was never rude to inferiors, was never aware that they were inferiors, except when they were pretentious and aroused his quick irritation. Stephen was her husband: she loved him. Hilary had loved her: she pitied him.

When Stephen came back he was still grave; but once as they were washing up he began to grin with unexpected mischievousness.

"I can't help laughing to myself," he said, "when I think of Badoureau in my old blue serge suit. I wish we could have persuaded him to wear it as far as Eastbourne."

"What a curious notion!" cried Priscilla. "It made him look like a growing boy."

"I felt a satisfaction in seeing him wear it."

"But why?"

"Because I wore it the first time I met him, when he ran me down in his motor, and when I first felt an overwhelming resentment against him and all he stood for. And I should—it's very vicious, I know; but I really should—have liked him to wear those clothes in public, because I've worn them in public and suffered from the sense that I was incurably shabby and ill-clothed. I wish he could once have that feeling. It would do him all the humiliating good in the world. But he'll never have it. . . ." Stephen sadly shook his head, and walked about, drying Hilary's teacup. "He's not the kind that does, worse luck! Though he's the kind that needs it."

CHAPTER XII: VISITORS AT THE COTTAGE

i

HIGH above London, at an altitude which allows a man to walk on a level with the top of Saint Paul's Cathedral, and even, upon a clear day, to patronize London's great church from a slightly superior viewpoint, Priscilla and Stephen were making their new home. Their cottage, which lay near the steep street that makes Hampstead continue to show some of the air of a country town, was almost incredibly small. In a bygone day it would have been called "poky," although more recent developments of suburban house-building have strangely destroyed the withering potency of that word; and in small rooms, but with wide-open windows, our newer civilization is being reared in a perfect dream of hygiene and kindergarten. It did not matter to the Moores that their neighbours were puzzled to see people of a different culture sharing their group of tiny cottages. Such bewilderment was only a passing phase, preliminary to the chase of all uneducated poor people from the delectable habitations coveted by the modern poor æsthetes. The modern poor æsthete must have a home; that home must be cheap. Accordingly, until such time as the housing of æsthetes is seriously considered by the State, it has to be inconveniently small. The surviving poor people who occupy small houses in favourite spots are driven forth, partly by a growing snobbery which leads them to horrible little villas, partly by the insistent graspingness of the envious, but wholly innocent, æsthete in search of a home. To grab a cottage or a tiny flat, and to furnish it with pick-ups from shops dealing in imitation worm-holes and fake spinnets and spinning-wheels, is the

rapid work of the nest-building æsthete far and wide. Pewter, brass, lacquer, oak, walnut, china, tapestry, chintz, shabby rugs, pallid wall-papers or simulation rafters—all these are quickly improvised and appropriated. And the result is an æsthetic home, fit for the tepid ecstasies of conventional art-lovers. It was a home something upon those lines, because such furnishings are inexpensive and exceedingly tasteful, that Priscilla and Stephen had made. They were no better, and no worse, than hundreds of others. Why should they have been?

In their little cottage there was a tiny sitting-room, a still tinier dining-room, a thimble-like kitchen, and two demure bedrooms which made one think of *Cranford* and *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *Rosamund Gray*. It did not take much furniture to make such a cottage habitable and comfortable, and the less furniture there was in the drawing-room the more people could sit there. Even so, it may be doubted whether all the Evandines and all the presentable Moores could have been comfortably accommodated at one time, as that would have meant seven people, and it is surprising how few it takes to make a small room appear overcrowded. Some of them would certainly have drifted back into the dining-room. It was this fact which led Priscilla, when they were, in the common phrase, "settled," to receive her friends in detachments.

She had obtained, from a cottage in the neighbourhood, one of those little daily helps who, by the initiate, are called "mushrooms"—loquacious children of fourteen or fifteen or sixteen who come each morning with a small bundle and who go away each evening with a mystifyingly large bundle. They may have earned their generic title by sudden morning appearances, or by their small size, or by all sorts of strange means (though the real origin of the term is a secret); but however that may be, and under whatever name they may be known, mushrooms

are a feature of suburban domestic service which will not lightly be forgotten. Priscilla's mushroom was called Irene. She was an excellent worker, and she took great interest in the household, besides being terrified of Stephen and openly charmed with her mistress. The house was spotless from top to bottom; and Priscilla was able to smooth her skirts complacently in the afternoons, when, on the days that Stephen worked at home, she took her place beside him in the sitting-room and hoped that nobody would call upon them that day.

ii

The cottage had a narrow garden in front of it, where Stephen was supposed to dig and to plant flowers; but Stephen suggested that Roy might give him a hand with it, and this led to some delay. Besides, to begin remaking a garden in midsummer is ridiculous, and it proved to be better to let the brightly coloured flowers fancied by the previous householder bloom and wither before alterations in style and composition were attempted. In the back garden Romeo walked and played, rather wistful at his new surroundings, and obviously a little disillusioned at the sight of children peeping through the palings of the next garden and the sound of a dog barking and dragging his chain two gardens away. Romeo had been brought thither in the motor, guarded by Mrs. Evandine and Dorothy. He had seriously watched from Dorothy's side the whole of the road from Totteridge, and Dorothy had the ghastly idea that he was making mental notes for a return journey. His greeting of Priscilla, however, had relieved her of that dread, for he had sprung forward with every mark of delight. Stephen, too, had been welcomed; but the house had made Romeo shrug his shoulders. He had sniffed all round it, his stomach approaching the ground, and had only

been reconciled at last by a saucer of milk, a sardine, and a considerable amount of petting. There was always that beastly old dog barking two gardens away. Romeo did not like dogs. He regarded them with outward cool intrepidity, as nervous men do, but with a beating heart.

On that day Irene brought in the tea, and everybody pretended not to look at her, although they all furtively examined her as she went demurely backwards and forwards with a brighter colour and a painful, clambering attempt to be very quiet. The moment she had gone Dorothy hurried to say, in a breathless voice:

"Isn't she sweet! She's got awfully globular eyes, hasn't she? And round cheeks."

Priscilla proudly smiled, striving to appear indifferent.

"She's a good worker," she said, with a professional air. "Though I feel I must mutter a charm when I say that; because our next door neighbour tells me that girls don't go into service now."

"Biddy *really* wants to come to you," explained Mrs. Evandine. "She asked me whether you would want a parlourmaid. I asked her what *I* should do in that case. So she stays with me."

"How frightened I am of Biddy!" cried Dorothy. "She's secret. I'm sure she's secret."

"Do you mean 'discreet'?" asked Stephen. "Or 'secretive'?"

"Neither. Just secret. Like somebody in the *Arabian Nights*. You almost expect her to break out into French. . . . I do think this is a splendid little house." Poor Dorothy's face paled as she spoke, for though she was as glad as could be of their happiness she could hardly keep from thinking that she too would like such a house of her own. Mrs. Evandine looked gently at her, smiling with that quiet affection which made people confide in her so readily.

"David *is* coming, isn't he?" she asked.

"Yes. Here he is!" They could see him unlatch the wooden gate at the farther end of the garden, and walk up the long flagged path to the front door. Then Irene ushered him into the room, her great eyes bulging with shy joy and her cheeks flushed crimson as she breathlessly pressed back against the door to let him enter.

"Hallo, people!" He came forward with an inclusive smile and shook Stephen's hand. There was no doubt of his power to be at home anywhere, and of his familiarity with the cottage, of which he had been the real discoverer.

Something made Priscilla glance from David to Dorothy; but Dorothy's eyes were lowered, so she could not read her expression. It had struck Priscilla for the first time that David was very debonair, and she remembered that Dorothy was staying at Totteridge. She did not wish either of them to be unhappy.

iii

Later, when Dorothy and Priscilla were alone together, and when nobody was in the house but themselves, there was a little talk between them.

"Are you pleased with everything?" Dorothy asked. "Your mother and David and I had quite a rush to get things fairly straight before you got back. I didn't know what to do about that big bowl that Mr. Vanamure sent. It's such miles too big for the house, but so awfully sumptuous. . . . He'll expect to see it when he comes!"

"Oh dear! I suppose everybody will look round furtively! You've done wonderfully, dear. You're a tremendous brick. You know how we feel, don't you? It's all beautiful."

"Priscilla, I wish you'd tell me. I've been wondering what to do—what to set about doing."

"What do you mean?" Priscilla's eyes opened.

"Work, my dear. I must now work."

"But you're staying with mother!"

"I know. She's awfully kind and nice. But although I don't mind staying with her a month—or even two months—I can't go on like that."

"Well, then you come here."

"That would be jolly too; but you know Stephen agreed that I might get some work. I thought I might be a cook or dressmaker——"

"Dorothy! Don't!" complained Priscilla. "That sounds horrible." Her voice took on a new urgency. "You know I should hate myself if I thought I'd——"

"You haven't! At least, it was inevitable. But it's one result of our all living together, and Stephen providing all the money. . . . You're so much better off, somehow. . . . But he's giving the old man a weekly sop, and he can't go on supporting me. Besides . . . my occupation's gone. I'm a cumberer. . . ."

Dorothy spoke lightly; but as she spoke her eyes filled. Priscilla put her arm round her and protested; struck to the heart by a note in Dorothy's speech of bleak forlornness.

"Suppose you stay your month or two months with mother, or come here and go back to her. She'd like you to stay always. That's quite perfectly certain."

"I couldn't."

"I've thought of you taking my place." It had been a part of Priscilla's consolation in leaving her mother.

Dorothy shook her head decidedly. Such a life would be one of intolerable inactivity.

"It's got to be work!" she said, with an exaggerated gravity. "Work or poison."

"Then we'll think of something. But have your holiday. You're enjoying it? You're happy, aren't you? You're not bored with it?"

Dorothy hastily removed any doubt upon that score.

"I'm simply living in the lap of comfort and I don't feel I ought to. Your mother stops me from helping Biddy. I can't even sew, and I've got nothing to do. Nothing even to grumble at! I offered to read your father's proofs; but he and I don't agree about punctuation, so he said I wasn't to dream of it."

"You seem to have been a regular busybody."

"Well, Biddy smiles at me! I wish I knew what that girl thinks. I'm sure she'll end by marrying Mr. Vanamure, or Mr. Agg, or that poor old deaf gentleman who talks about Ariosto. . . . But I expect that he's too stupid for her."

"I expect Biddy will marry Minch."

"Well then she's married to him already, I shouldn't wonder. The girl intrigues me!"

"It's quite obvious that you're discontented at having nothing to do, and what father calls 'running to conjecture,' which is a kind of seed. We must find you work. But surely you must have been busy here!"

"Pooh!" said Dorothy, with contempt. "This little cupboard! I could scour it all in a day!" She was bent upon showing how great were her normal ideas of housekeeping. "And cook meals as well!"

"I'm sure you couldn't!" cried Priscilla indignantly. "But then perhaps I'm slow!" It was a rueful thought to her, and particularly unwelcome at this stage of her acute housewifely vanity. Such a cry from the heart reduced Dorothy to entire penitence.

"You poor old thing!" she exclaimed in a warm voice of sympathy. "I didn't mean it. How could I be so beastly!"

They forgave one another. It seemed to Priscilla that the whole situation was unsatisfactory. There was no reason—except Dorothy's pride—why she should not stay at Totteridge for many months as a privileged guest.

There was every reason, in Priscilla's mind, which for a little while was naturally inclined to run on marriage, why Dorothy and David should quite as happily marry as Stephen and herself. Yet if Dorothy, like all these poor people, including Stephen, had a pride that dwarfed every other consideration, she might go away and bury herself somewhere upon some stupid and stupefying work; might lose touch with Stephen, with everybody; might get warped, or drift into marriage out of pity for some hopeless nobody or out of sheer need for distraction. Hastily, Priscilla saw it all, invented a supposititious future history for Dorothy of the utmost unpleasantness.

"Whatever happens," she said, instinctively struggling against the fulfilment of such a gloomy prophecy, "don't think of doing anything that takes you away from us. We can't do without you. Neither of us can!"

Dorothy impulsively kissed her. The kind words had gone straight to her heart, which a little ached with the fear of uselessness, and which was so quickly touched that she was always swift in acknowledgment.

"You're a dear!" Dorothy breathed. "I'm an ungrateful pig. But I know you understand, and that makes me feel lots better." The two girls exchanged a frank look that was almost searching.

iv

Roy came upon another evening. He met Stephen in town and they travelled to Hampstead together. Roy was now seventeen, and engaged upon a spurt of growth. This made his movements unhandy and his eyes not quite candid. His voice was gruff, his fingers were stained orange as a result of the constant smoking of cigarettes, his complexion was grey and inclined to be thick. Superficially, therefore, he was not attractive. But to those capable of reading the signs, Roy was developing into a

very handsome young man. The furtive grey eyes would presently become clear, as understanding grew of those intimations which at present were making chaos in Roy's mind; the orange fingers would be pumice-stoned clean; the muddy skin would give place to an attractive pallor ready for that bronze which the advertisements say is the mark of the handsome man. And Roy would then attend to his hair and his finger-nails and would change in a week from a hoarse-voiced simulation man into a reality beyond all the dreams of his present coy parent-dodging Phyllises.

Upon his first introduction to the cottage Roy was ill at ease. He had been some weeks apart from Stephen, so that in his impressionable state he had been further estranged from his brother by the old man. Also he was very shy of Priscilla, because she seemed to him to be a lady, and he was only at ease with the kind of girl who giggles with her back to a wall or stands with her arm linked in the arm of a girl companion. He felt mildly what young Marlow in a more licentious age felt when in the acknowledged presence of Kate Hardcastle. He felt disarmed: the things he could say to other girls did as little here as they would have done with Dorothy. He was full of the shamed sentimental solicitude of the typical young male concerning his related womenfolk. They stood apart. So he had nothing to say but an awkward "yes" or "no" to everything that was suggested, and "please" and "thanks" to every item of the meal which Priscilla—also rather shy—pressed upon his attention. The meal was not a success. Stephen's attempted cordiality was hampered by preoccupation.

After Roy had been shown over the cottage—hanging and tip-toeing as awkwardly as privileged visitors to Windsor Castle when the Royal Family is absent—the three of them returned to the sitting-room, and Stephen indicated his magnificently exaggerated plans for the front

garden. Then they all sat down and looked at one another. Brothers notoriously have little to say: they generally need the spur of a third: and neither Priscilla nor Roy had the least idea of dealing with characters so different as each was from the other. The burden fell upon Stephen, who already knew all that Roy would tell him about the situation in Islington. In vain Priscilla asked Roy about himself: he remained dumb for fear of Stephen. At last Stephen, at Priscilla's bidding, went to look for Romeo, and their exchanged glance agreed upon a longer absence. When he had gone Priscilla began again.

"Stephen said you were in an office," she said. "I expect it's all routine work. Do you like it?"

"Oh, it's all right," he answered without enthusiasm, dropping his head and looking at her at last. "Sometimes."

"And sometimes horrid, I suppose. My brother's in an office—in a publisher's office. To hear him speak of it you'd think they never did any work there at all."

That touched Roy's fancy, and he smiled faintly with an air of superior knowledge.

"There's a good deal of miking," he said. "At our place the chaps mostly do what they like except when the great 'I AM' comes in. He tells them all off properly. He's the manager."

"I notice you say 'them,'" demurely suggested Priscilla. "So I suppose that means you're very virtuous." Such a suggestion spurred Roy's pride. Stubbornly he resisted it.

"Oh, I don't know so much about that," he said. "Always get me to do any of the cheeking. See, we have a lot of visitors, and there's one deaf old girl—lady comes in pretty often. . . . They tell her all sorts of things. *She* can't hear, you know: doesn't matter to her what you say. Some of the things would make you laugh.

. . . But it's not very interesting work. I have to keep the petty cash, and get dockets for everything I pay out. You'd have laughed the other day. I got a docket for a penny—'Cheese to tempt mice into the dustbin.' We've got a way of catching them—a plank run up against an empty dustbin, and cheese in the bin. They can't get out. We get five or six in a morning."

"Horrid! And do you kill them?"

"Oh yes." He smiled in a manly way, flattered by her squeamishness. But he refrained from details, to Priscilla's relief.

She presently tried a different kind of subject, having, as it appeared, exhausted his office.

"Stephen and I want you often to come here. You will, won't you?"

He grinned and faintly flushed before answering like a nice boy:

"If you'll have me." It did make his eyes sparkle, as a compliment would have done.

"Of course. We thought, if you would come and live in Hampstead. Or do you feel you must stay with your father?"

"Oh no!" said Roy promptly. "Don't want to stay with him. No, I'd rather get away, now Dolphy and Steve are gone." She shook her head at the knowledge that none of the three children loved their father. To her it was something hardly conceivable. She loved both of her parents so warmly that the Moores seemed almost callous in that relation. Yet she knew that the two elder ones were not callous, and that there must be something to make them so uniformly unfriendly to the old man.

"You've seen Dorothy?" He said, "Once or twice," and that he'd been to Totteridge, but then he added, with great ingenuousness:

"But I didn't much like going there. The maid was so stiff and starchy, and I felt I didn't 'belong' there.

As though I was messing everything. And young Dolphy was in a state in case I broke anything or carried mud on my boots. I'm sorry . . . I forgot it was your house. You know I can't help thinking how funny it is . . . well . . . not funny, but strange — your marrying Stephen. Not a bit what I should have thought. Really, it's not!"

"But you're very fond of Stephen, I'm sure." Priscilla was just a trifle nettled. She could never see any need for the amazement which several of her own friends, by more indirect means, and with less candour, had expressed.

"Oh, I suppose so," he hesitatingly recorded.

"Roy!" Her exclamation made him laugh. "That's most awfully lukewarm."

It puzzled her. She could not understand it. Why shouldn't a brother praise frankly, and frankly speak of his deep affection? She was unwittingly walking upon a volcano. She did not guess what she was doing; yet her pressure upon that question was precipitating a catastrophe.

"Oh, I like him well enough," Roy assured her. "I mean to say, he's not a fellow to go into ecstasies over. Not the *sort* of chap. He's so quiet. Of course," he began to smile with a sort of laboured archness, "it's different with you. You'd naturally think he was perfect. But you see I know he's not."

"I think you're horribly unkind," protested Priscilla, laughing, unconsciously relieved by his ingenuous attitude.

Her protest seemed to go to his head like wine.

"You see I *know*," he persisted. "That's what Tom Harrington—that's my friend—was saying. He said that Stephen being so quiet put you off. . . ."

"Well, of course if you make up your mind beforehand about anybody it's sure to turn out wrong. You'd be

surprised how mistaken I was about Dorothy. Before I saw her I thought of her as a tall thin girl with a pale face—very serious."

"I say," blundered Roy. "About what I said. Of course I'd back up old Stephen in anything. He's a bit stiff; but he's been awfully good to me. I wasn't saying anything against him. I think he's a fine chap. But what the old man says, you see . . ."

Roy paused, and looked over at the door, because he had heard Stephen's returning footsteps.

"You oughtn't to mind that," said Priscilla. "When you know Stephen for yourself."

"Yes, I know. . . . But the old man's been telling me. . . . Ssh!"

Stephen came into the room, hearing involuntarily Roy's last speech.

"What's the old man been telling you?" he asked, in a strange voice.

Roy looked at him for quite a perceptible space, struggling between speech and silence. His cheeks flushed up, and his eyes glittered. He was the picture of awkwardness.

"About . . . about you and Minnie Bayley," he blurted out. "You *wanted* to know."

Stephen smiled. Priscilla looked quickly at him. Roy sheepishly hung his head. Not one of them spoke for a moment. Then Stephen went to his bookshelves between the fireplace and the inner wall, and took out a book. It seemed to Priscilla that he was rather pale.

V

After the disconcerting pause Stephen replaced the book he had casually examined, and stepped round so that he stood between the others and the window.

"It's getting dark," he said. "Horrible to think of

the nights lengthening." Abruptly he continued: "By the way, Priscilla, it's a curious thing that the man next door is Skeffington. You remember that Badoureau said he lived at Hampstead."

"How strange!" Priscilla tried to shake off the effect of that silence. "How did you hear?"

"As I was going out this morning he was at the gate. He said: 'Oh, you're Moore.' It seems that David found out and told him. They hadn't met for some time, and Skeffington's recently moved here. He's promised to come in one evening."

"Is he married?" It occurred to Priscilla that the wife of Skeffington might be a pleasant neighbour. Her hope, however, was disappointed.

"Bachelor. He says his place is a pigsty, and that he envies us. I shouldn't imagine he was over-scrupulous in talk. These novelists never are. They'll tell you anything about themselves just to see how you take it. It's part of their vanity."

"How cynical you are! You must have noticed that, Roy."

Roy flushed up again. He clambered after her mood, pleased at being noticed and referred to.

"Oh yes," he said, breathlessly. "Frightfully cynical, is old Steve. Doesn't see any good in anybody. Makes you wonder if he sees any good in himself."

"Do you read Skeffington's books? Have you read any?"

"Not me. I've got no time for reading. No: what I go in for is comic songs."

"Hallo!" cried Stephen. "That's something new, isn't it?"

Roy stammered at being caught in some strange and damaging admission about himself.

"Well, rather new," he agreed. "I've been learning a few. Tom's helping me. You can make money by

singing them at smokers and masonics. Half a guinea a time. It's not to be sneezed at. That's what the old man says. . . ."

"Oh, the old man!" said Stephen, in a dry tone that cut across Roy's confidences like the cruel lash of a malicious whip. Roy flinched and stopped dead.

The old man, thought Priscilla. How she was beginning to dread those words. They always seemed to carry a significance out of all proportion to their sound. It was not only that their familiarity held a crudely contemptuous note, though she was not aware of that. The words meant more than a lack of love: they could be so uttered as to contain all the hostilities of the human voice. They were words that stung Stephen into brooding quiet. She had heard them spoken by the old man's three children, never with an affection or as any form of endearment, always with a recognition of some unpleasant power. The old man. The thought of him made her dimly uneasy, unhappy.

CHAPTER XIII: CONFIDENCES

i

AFTER Roy had gone, Priscilla sat quietly while Stephen wrote. She never knew what he was writing, unless by accident, for he never talked of his work and it was generally posted immediately upon completion. Indeed, she had seen one article on the South Downs in a weekly review and, upon remarking that it was interesting and that it "might almost have been written by" Stephen, had learned with mingled pride and hurtness that it actually was his. She couldn't understand why he should refrain from telling her, when she was really so much interested. She guessed that it was less secretiveness than habitual silence that made him thus uncommunicative; but she longed that he should as lavishly share his confidence as she was ready to share hers. That was it. She felt like a child who goes to kiss a constrained visitor and is repulsed, or perhaps like any cordial person chilled by a nature less expansive. She had already felt that chill more than once—the secret armour that he wore about his heart had already made her feel like a rebuffed child. Yet her love was as constant and her hope as keen. She knew that within its armour his heart beat warmly. One day there would be no armour.

Priscilla, although mindful of Stephen's work, wanted very much to speak about Roy. It would have done her good if she could have said—as she wanted to say: "What a funny boy Roy is. And whatever did he mean about Minnie Bayley? And who *is* she?" At first she looked at him occasionally with his head bent low, thinking that the busy pen would stop and the head be raised. Then the words had dried upon her lips, and she had felt a

funny faint choking feeling—a sort of sleepiness—and she had not said the words. That curious baulking had surprised her. She had tried to head herself back. The difficulty made her think of all sorts of ways of introducing the subject. Once she thought she really must speak; but no sound had come. It was very strange. Why on earth shouldn't she ask? How silly she was getting. She would say: "Stephen: sorry to interrupt; but who *is* Minnie Bayley?" Then she felt that she could never say it naturally, that after all this unwelcome constraint her voice would tremble, or would sound dry or serious or even suspicious. It was her chief dread that when she asked the question she might seem to give it a solemn turn. It was *only* curiosity, she assured herself. There was no reason why she should know or want to know about any particular person. Why shouldn't she ask? It wasn't as though Stephen was ever rude to her. She wasn't afraid; but one thing she had learnt about men was that they did not like women's anxiety about them unless it was flattering. She knew that if her voice quivered it would irritate Stephen. On any really serious occasion, uncertainty of tone would bring him at once to her side, loyal and eager to be her champion. But this was a triviality. It was nothing, except that for some unaccountable reason the idea of asking the question had made her self-conscious. "I'm tired," she thought. "But I wish he would tell me about her. I wonder who she is. Roy spoke in such a peculiar way. Stephen will tell me, of course. There's nothing to tell. Only I'm *curious*. That's all that's the matter. I might say: 'Don't think me horrible, Stephen, but I'm simply dying to know what you know about Minnie Bayley.' Or: 'It's a curious thing I can't get that name out of my head—the girl Roy . . .' Or: '*What* was that name Roy mentioned?' " No! that wouldn't be a candid way of beginning, because she knew the name. She would have to say: "Minnie

Bayley: explain!" Or: "Was what the old man said about you not very nice, Stephen?" There were innumerable ways in which she could raise the question; yet she had now thought about it so much, in such a little time, that she seemed to have been worrying for hours, and the moment had gone by for any simple, natural inquiry. That did not prevent the name of Minnie Bayley from echoing through her thoughts, and constantly returning, even when she thought of other things. It kept coming throbbing through, like incipient toothache, that sometimes faintly, as it were, tries the tooth like a cautious skater before it ventures into the open.

Restlessly, Priscilla got up from the chair and took a book, the pages of which she listlessly turned. She felt quite miserable with the effort not to be silly. Stephen, hearing her movement, turned his head, and laid down the pen.

"Are you tired, dear?" he asked. "It's too bad that I should be working."

He came across to her, and sat down upon the floor by her side, taking her hand lightly for an instant. But she thought he did not look at her. Priscilla loved to see his face quite close, though the lines in it hurt her.

"No, no. I'm not tired," she made answer, trying her voice to see if it were normal, and finding it rather flat and hard. "What is it you're doing?"

"Well, I'm trying to do the first of a series of 'Walks in London'—a sort of mixture of antiquarian and pedestrian—mostly pedestrian, I'm afraid—talk about different districts. I've been doing Islington. I shall do King's Cross and Hampstead and Chiswick, and all sorts of places. I thought I might make something by them, if I could get some taken as a series."

"Good idea!" She was painfully anxious to get over her hesitating state. He continued, gratified:

"And then perhaps a book. Illustrated with old plans and prints. But I must ask David."

"Do we want money so badly, Steve?"

He drew his feet up and clasped his hands round his knees.

"Rather badly, dear. I've been going into things, and I find that I haven't been averaging much more than three pounds a week for the last month. I *must* make a minimum of five pounds a week. It can't otherwise be done, with what . . . the . . ." He stopped suddenly, and Priscilla guessed that he was unable to refer to his liability to the old man.

Here was her opportunity, you would think? But no! She was now concerned with their financial position. All her nervousness, it seemed, had run suddenly to cowardice. She felt merely and inexplicably abject before that factor, so new, and hitherto in her life so unimportant, which now dominated everything.

"Am I extravagant, Stephen?" It was the first wistful thought of inexperience.

"My dear! You haven't had a chance to be. Of course not. You see I made a good deal in the winter and the spring. I did a great deal, and it paid me well—particularly those articles in the *New Monthly*. But after all I'm principally a journalist, and that means that money's not as certain as it might be, or as regular. I've got *The Norm* (for as long as Kempison runs it as a hobby), and that's a steady two guineas, with often a bit more; but the two other papers have been erratic. I think they're nervous of me. And finally old Subbage hasn't had much hack-work for me. It's quite all right; only I'm always nervy about money. When you've been very poor you're always inclined to be morbid about it."

She nodded. She remembered his scruples about their marriage.

"Stephen, you never feel sorry. . . . I mean, about

us?" she whispered. "You're not anxious?" She knew it was absurd to ask such a thing. "I feel I should be to blame if you got wretched. Do try and tell me if you're worried, my dearest. . . ."

At first he did not trouble to answer her in so many words, but only kissed her slender hand as it lay so temptingly near. She slipped her arm round his neck so that her hand rested gently upon his shoulder and his head against her.

"As long as you're happy," he said, after a moment of still silence, "I'm not worried about anything. You've given me the first happiness I've ever had, and I've got less to worry about than I've ever had."

She was struck by the words.

"Less?" she asked, delightedly. "Really? How beautiful."

"I only want you to be happy."

"But I *am!*" She kissed him in a sort of glee. "You see, Stephen . . . if you'll excuse me for saying it . . . you don't change much. I can't very well tell if you're worried or rollicking." They both laughed at such a word. "I can't imagine you . . . See, when you look at me I expect to see—perhaps a radiant light on your face . . . transfiguring . . . like one gets in books. And I sort of feel that *really* you're thinking about Guild Socialism or next week's rent. That makes me wish you talked more about yourself."

"But, my dear! It seems to me that we spend our days in talking about me. Never about *you*. I sometimes shut up from the sheer dread of boring you to death. I shouldn't like to leave off one time and find you stiff and cold with boredom."

"You *do* talk a lot . . . about what you are, and think, or have done. But never about this minute. Never about . . . you and *me*. You don't often get rapturous. No, dear. I don't want you to; but sometimes I think

I'd like to be more *inside* your mind. You've told me about your series of articles: I wish you'd tell me about, Stephen, the . . . Oh, it's no good. I seem to be grumbling, when I'm not. . . ."

"Should I tell you what I'm going to do, do you mean?"

"Sometimes . . . and sometimes remember I'm a girl, Steve."

There was no need for that reminder, as she knew. She would not have said it if she had not at that precise moment remembered Minnie Bayley. She was opening her mouth to say, "and I'm very curious," when Stephen, unconsciously turning the conversation away from its climax, reverted to his plans, about which he knew she liked to hear.

"If I could write a book of some sort I should do well. You can write as many reviews and essays and articles as you like, but if you haven't published a book you can get only a little private reputation. But if I wrote a book it would take a tremendous time, and have to be a good one."

"Southey?" she asked, remembering in a flash her father's suggestion.

"Nobody much wants it unless your father does such a book. Should I do one, do you think, on Shakespeare? A real dressing-down? Telling the truth about him?"

"Oh, be careful, dear," pleaded Priscilla. "Not Shakespeare! He's such a fetish!"

"Very good subject," he warned her, and would have said more but that in his turn he was interrupted.

At the front door there was a little tapping.

ii

The one who tapped was a rather slim man with a deep voice.

"Skeffington," he said, affirmatively. "I promised to look in. Am I in the way?"

Stephen shook his hand, which was very skinny, and ushered him into the room. Here the neighbour, who looked about rather like a bird from behind his pince-nez, greeted Priscilla with a smilingness that greatly pleased her. In one minute, it was clear, Skeffington made himself at home.

"First," he said, "before I forget. Have you got any oil? To spare? Thank you very much. I could run down to the shop; but you get so oily in carrying a can about. If there's one thing I dislike it is getting my hands oily. I'm a decadent, you see; and the thing a decadent dislikes above all others is grease."

"If that's the test," Priscilla said quickly, "I'm afraid we're decadents too."

"You probably like it in food."

"No."

"How splendid! I'm glad we are neighbours. I remember the disgust I felt the first time I read that George Gissing loved everything drenched in fat. I'm supposed to be a disciple of Gissing's; but that is only because we're both urban novelists, and any stick's good enough to beat a dog with when one's out for sapience."

"You're rather a chatterbox!" thought Priscilla, looking at the man's sandy beard and his strong teeth, which showed a good deal as he spoke. "But inoffensive."

"I hope you don't mind my coming in unceremoniously. I want the oil, but I'd intended to come, in any case, because I wanted to meet you. A man you know—one Hilary Badoureau—writes to me that when he discovers your address, which he seems to have been too flurried to remember, he's going to have the satisfaction of introducing me . . . to *you*, Mrs. Moore. So as I have scraped acquaintance with your husband, I thought I'd write back proudly and say there was already friendship between us."

"Be sure to do so!" Priscilla told him, laughing. "But

I can't understand why you seem to have thought it necessary to introduce yourself to us."

"And of course I know your brother. He's my wretched publisher. But he's my friend as well, curiously enough."

The stranger sat and looked from one to the other with an ingratiating smile, using his little hands to punctuate his remarks, which perhaps he would not have done but for their smallness. His hair was short and thin, his eyes clear but rather almond-shaped, his forehead low and solid but receding and looking higher than it was owing to the loss of front hair. The effect of this and of a broad aquiline nose was to give the head in some aspects a bird-like air, as Hilary had indicated. All his movements were nervous but not ungraceful, and while he was clearly a vain man he was not vain in a sombre manner, and so was forgiven for his vice. His voice was low and musical, and his laugh frequent. Stephen and Priscilla both liked him, the one because she liked all people who were cheerful and unaffected, the other because, while he did not altogether follow Skeffington's gratuitous self-explications, he liked the man's work. It was about such a life as he himself had lived, and he was prepared to find that Skeffington, however careless he seemed, was at heart very sober and on the whole candid. A claimant for the martyr's crown.

"And now," said Skeffington, imperturbably continuing his talk, as they seemed to be waiting for him to do so, "I will borrow the oil if you'll let me, and leave Moore to his work. I didn't realize that he'd be writing."

"I wasn't."

"Is the pen and paper there for mere swank? I'll come in again earlier one evening if I may? Perhaps I might even bring Badoureau? Or Evandine? That would be very kind of you. Oh, by the way! I was going to tell you. I don't know if either of you has been

doing wrong recently?" He looked from Stephen to Priscilla, and back again, with an assumed air of gravity.

"I don't *know* of anything," said Priscilla, hesitatingly.

"Not recently," answered Stephen, with a dry smile.

"It's very curious. I've been out in my front garden, where I'm waging a warfare against the green fly on my roses; and as you know a novelist always sleeps with one eye open——"

"Why *is* that?" interrupted Priscilla.

"Oh, because he can't be in two places at once," replied Skeffington, "like a bird. Well—that interferes with my narrative. It's a digression, and according to the newspapers digressions in a modern book are a sort of rubbish. However. While I was dealing out justice to the green fly and to those disgusting things which I believe are called cuckoo-spit . . . I became aware . . ." His voice declined to a note of mystery. "I became aware that visitors to The Grove, come no doubt to see the house of the lamented Du Maurier, had a spy, or watcher by the threshold. . . . In fact, I was not alone. . . ."

"You don't mean Romeo?" inquired Priscilla, with a pang.

"Romeo?"

"Our little cat."

"No—not Romeo. But a most wonderfully attractive spy or detective or dogger of footsteps. I can only suppose he was that, because when I poked my head over the hedge he looked chagrined and departed. Now, don't you think that's remarkable? I should lock up your silver!"

"How alarming!" said Priscilla. "Where was he?"

"Up and down here . . . standing at the end cottage . . . always stealing glances, for he could steal nothing else, at this house. I thought it only right to tell you."

Stephen appeared much interested.

"A shabby man?" he asked.

"On the contrary. Dressed to the nines."

"Young or old?"

"Well-preserved old. He looked something like the Silver King . . . grey-haired, but of the old actor type. . . . In a blue serge suit, with a spotted necktie and a delightful spotted handkerchief emerging from an outer pocket. I noticed all this particularly because I'm a novelist, and novelists, you are aware, see everything. Novelists of my kind, sedulously collecting our meticulous detail, are the merest walking spy-glasses."

During this speech, after the very beginning, the Moores had paid little attention to what was being said. Stephen was biting his lip and smiling with a look of weariness; and Priscilla was frowning, puzzled. What did it mean? What was the sense of it? First Roy, then the name of the mysterious girl or woman, and finally this story of a watcher easily recognizable to both of them.

"Now," said Skeffington, "I see I've given you a tiresome quarter of an hour! I see you recognize the old man. And Mrs. Moore is going to let me rummage for my oil."

"Yes," said Stephen, with a quick glance at Priscilla and a most sinister inflexion of his voice. "You're quite right. I *do* recognize the old man."

iii

After Skeffington had gone, Priscilla said:

"Stephen: the old man is evidently being a nuisance to you. It's getting on my nerves. Can't you tell me what it's all about?" Then she went on, with her heart suddenly beating a trifle faster: "Is it this Minnie Bayley that Roy spoke about?"

Stephen gave her no encouragement to proceed further. He sat down again at the table, and examined his pen.

"Yes," he said. "The old man's past a joke. I must find a means of stopping him, or he'll be spoiling our lives. There's no question of it. Now, dear, I must just try and think what to do about the old man, and then I must tell you all about it."

"You'll tell me all about——" She broke off, not wishing to show her joy.

"Yes. About Minnie Bayley," said Stephen, patiently, and then sat quiet for a few minutes. Presently he took a sheet of notepaper from their escritoire and wrote a very short note. This he sealed and stamped.

And all this time Priscilla sat in her chair watching him at his task. When she saw him thus, and with her mind entirely at rest, she allowed her memory to call up the Stephen of an earlier time—a Stephen more abrupt than this one, dogged, more assertive, uncompromising. There was no doubt that this later Stephen was different. It was matter for thought that he should have changed, and matter also for speculation. She knew nothing of his life since their parting, save that he had been working hard and without hope. He had told her that during the whole time of their estrangement he had been practically in despair, and that even his ambition had been blunted. Instead of planning futures he had been scanning pasts; instead of hopes he had had regrets. Well, that, she knew, was over now: his hope, although rarely expressed, was deeper (if less ardent and sanguine) than her own. She could therefore only imagine what must have been his state during all the months when he had been dead to her. Priscilla knew that he must have gone about his work—as she had gone about her pastime—with no outward sign of grief; but she knew that the changes so clearly observable as she sat looking at him this evening had been graven in that black time so deeply

that they would never be erased. All that her mother had read in his face, of pride, of pain, and of endurance, was as apparent to Priscilla. She knew very much of Stephen's nature, although she was still bewildered by it. She knew, as women often seem to know things, implicitly. She could not have expressed her knowledge; but she could with complete authority have criticized any analysis that might have been made. She could not have said, "Thus and thus is my husband" (it would not have occurred to her to say it); but if one had said to her, "Thus and thus your husband must be," Priscilla's reception of that theme would have been unerringly just, in spite of her love.

She wondered about Stephen incessantly. Her own nature did not so greatly interest her, excepting as it answered or did not answer to Stephen's need. He was her boy; she no longer had any hope that was not bound up with him. She hoped for a baby because it would be also his baby. She hoped for his success, his recognition, because it seemed to her that that must be what he was in the world for. She could not think he was only in the world to make her happy. There must, with Stephen, be some other end. His recognition was to her more important than any worldly success. To Priscilla Stephen was definitely the writer of all those whom she knew who most deserved to be acknowledged as a personal talent. He was not simply a dilettante, not a poseur, not a mediocrity, not a snob, not a mandarin, not a toady, not a busybody; and she thought that a journalistic critic who was none of these things deserved well of those who prized literature as one of the greatest things in life.

But above all she loved him. He was her lover. If he had been as poor in talent as he was poor in pocket she could still have thought him the one man; although that is too glaring a hypothesis to urge, because Stephen's talent was to her so much involved in the personality she

loved. To say that we should love a man even though he lacked the quality we recognize as most specifically his, is to say that we love some husk, and not the man. But with Priscilla it may be said that she meant that if Stephen had been no writer (as Nanki Poo was "no musician"), but, thinking as he did, had followed some other occupation, she would still have loved him. Her desire for his recognition was thus not a form of vanity or what is called snobbery, but a religious desire that right should triumph.

When Priscilla thought how much she loved Stephen her eyes half closed and a flush stole into her cheeks. In delicious reverie she recalled a thousand things that she would always remember, a thousand glances, speeches, actions, belonging to herself and Stephen alone, unclaimable by anybody else in the world, because she and Stephen alone understood them and alone of all others would never forget them. She remembered their first meeting, other meetings, their quarrel, word for word the letters they had exchanged, her slow, unbelieving sorrow that he never came, settling into a dim bewildered acquiescence in the passing of time but never acceptance of the fact that they were severed for ever. She remembered the scene at the dinner-table over Stephen's review of her father's book, the sight of his acceptance of David's invitation, their meeting . . . and their talk. She had long given up blushing at the memory of her part in the talk, which so definitely had led to his confession. She now only rejoiced in it, with a secret abandonment to pride. She remembered the moment of his meeting with Hilary on that same afternoon and again when he brought Dorothy to Totteridge; and the time when she and her mother and David had gone to tea at Islington—when Stephen had given her the ring; and many meetings thereafter during their engagement. As she remembered her wedding day her thoughts seemed to beat unquestion-

ingly a slower measure, as though there was too much to be remembered at any but a slow pace which allowed of disentanglement; for the memories of that thrilling day were crowded so thickly as to be almost painful in their number and intensity. She could remember Biddy awaking her by drawing back the curtains to admit the warm sun, and Biddy saying in a prim voice that began to tremble and then became quite natural and loud, something to the effect that it was a lovely day "for it," and that she hoped . . . And Priscilla went on remembering her mother's coming, and Dorothy . . . And then all the people looking in on the way to church, and the little breathless drive there. . . . The recollection made her breathe faster. She could see again, with such moving reality that the tears started, the little bungalow upon the down, so lovely in its solitude, and so buried among the beautiful down and valley land and the barely chequered green of the magic vistas. . . .

While Priscilla thought thus of their past days Stephen was bent upon their future. He had written the letter that was to do so much. His resolve was clearly taken. With his back to Priscilla he stood by the table with the letter in his hand, and as he thought he was idly twisting the letter between his finger and thumb so that the corners nicked successively upon the bare table. At last he turned towards Priscilla. He was very pale indeed. Some emotion seemed to have changed his face entirely, so that his eyes looked like dying lights in far-sunken sockets, and so that his cheeks were thin and ashen. As she saw the change Priscilla was so shocked that instinctively she went towards him, stretching out loving arms. But Stephen only kissed her very quietly, and bade her wait until he had posted the letter.

He was away from the house for only two or three minutes; and when he came back he methodically took off his boots and put on his slippers, just as he might have

top of the house. On the floor below us there lived a commercial traveller named Bayley."

Priscilla gave a start. He felt her arm jerk; but she did not interrupt him.

"I'm speaking," he continued, "of a good time ago now, you must remember. Getting on for four or five years ago. Well, at that time I met your father between Barnet and Elstree, and he took me home, and I met you. I went on coming, went on seeing you, and somehow it happened that we saw each other very often. But you had a friend who lived in the neighbourhood, and I—because I thought I recognized some things in her that gave me a lot of anxiety for you—told you you oughtn't to have anything to do with her. I was convinced that she was one of those wretched girls. . . ."

"It's all right, Stephen," said Priscilla. "You were quite right about Ivy. Quite right."

"But you didn't think so, and we had a great row. You told me you never wanted to see me any more."

"Did I really say that? Oh, how *beastly* I must have been!" She pressed her face against his for an instant. "And yet you believed it. . . . Oh, Stephen!"

"I came away from Totteridge in a dreadful anger, and all the way home I was still madly angry. Then I began to cool, and to see that even if I'd been right in fact I'd been wrong to quarrel with you. It seemed that that was the worst sort of treachery to you, when I'd meant to protect you. . . . And I hadn't been able really to warn you because I hadn't liked to say to you what I thought about her. I began to wonder how I could apologize, how get back again, so that our friendship should keep on. But something your father had said to me—something that wasn't meant to apply to me at all, of course—made me think about the kind of life I belonged to and the kind of life you had led. I began to ask why it was that I felt so deeply all that you'd said.

Because you did rather rake my character in your tempest. . . . I suddenly saw that I'd been slipping into love with you, so that the thought of never seeing you again was an agony. I began to write all sorts of letters to you, begging you to forgive, to take me back—on any terms; but at that time the old man was doing rather well, and that meant that he was drinking a great deal, and never coming home sober. . . ."

"Poor Stephen!"

"I'd never told you about him. Never told your mother and father. I think I almost let them think I was alone in the world. I don't want to get mixed here; but to show you the three things. There was my quarrel with you—which was very bitter——"

"But not on your side, Stephen. I can't remember a word of yours that rankles."

"No. I was only angry with you for being so loyal. My anger was chiefly with myself for having been a fool; but my hatred, all that made the whole thing bitter, was directed against Ivy. There was my quarrel with you, there was the phrase your father had dropped (which I construed, I believe unwarrantably, into a hint that I was coming too often), and which certainly showed that he was a little tired of having me with him. Finally, there was the old man rolling in gorgeously drunk night after night. I thought to myself that these three things were all incompatible with my feelings. They were quite incompatible. They made the whole situation quite impossible. Whatever love I might have for you could never please your father. It didn't please him even so late as a year ago. You seemed wholly to despise me. The old man was making me despair. I think I really must have gone mad at that time. I felt as though there was nothing to be done, that everything, every possible outlook, was misery. I don't want to exaggerate all this, but I want to show you that I felt absolutely cut off from you. The

more I thought of you the greater the agony. I told you I wrote letters. But I tore them up, one after the other —tore them up and I think burned up every hope I had with the pieces. I used to stand watching them burn, and used to go to bed and lie quite rigid to keep myself from crying out and waking Roy, who was in the same bed. And the knowledge soaked into me that I could never come to Totteridge again—because I was horribly poor and your father was far from poor, because my father had degenerated into a wretched toper, because I was an ignorant chap who hadn't even learned how to treat the one he loved."

As the narration had proceeded, Stephen's voice had grown drier and drier, until it was little above a whisper; but Priscilla heard every word, and when he paused for a moment it was only because his mouth seemed to be wholly parched.

ii

"That's the beginning of the story, dear. It's a long exordium; but it was necessary so that you should understand what follows. This is the real story. I told you that the floor below us was occupied by a commercial traveller, but I didn't tell you any more. This man, being a drinker, struck up—although he was much younger than the old man—a sort of acquaintance with my father. They used to meet when the man was in the City, at those times when he was travelling in London—not as friends, but in a sort of casual way. I suppose that, as the phrase is, they 'used the same houses,' which means that they went into the same public-house at the same times, and saw each other there. This man Bayley was a perfect rascal, and no doubt is to this minute, as he's still alive. . . . He used shamefully to ill-treat Minnie, who was his wife."

"His *wife!*" cried Priscilla, growing pale. Then she sighed, and her eyes closed.

"We used to hear him throwing things about on the floor below, and she sometimes came upstairs to escape from him. That was when I was working very late at night, reading and trying to write, as you know I used to. The others were all in bed, the old man perhaps out, but always the children were in bed, and didn't hear the noise clearly enough to wake them. One night I went downstairs when it was extra bad, and threatened to beat Bayley if he didn't leave off. When I went into the room he was there, and she, in her nightdress, was lying on the floor half stunned. So I knocked him down, and said I'd call in the police if there was any more of it. Then I helped Mrs. Bayley up and heard no more that night. You mustn't suppose that this went on every night. He was often away—what is called 'on journey'—and sometimes for a fortnight at a time she used to be alone in her rooms. Quite alone, you understand. I don't think she knew anybody at all. I never heard her mention a friend, and to this moment I don't know where she was born and if she has any relatives living. Well, she often came upstairs to our room when she was alone, to where I was working, because she was very lonely; and she'd sit with me and we'd talk about all sorts of things, but mostly about my work and Dorothy and Roy, and what she wished she could do. And in this way a sort of friendship grew up between us. She was wretched, as I was. She was older than I was; but I think very little older; and I don't know which of us was the more wretched until we found that we could cheer each other up like this. I used to advise her to leave Bayley; but she could never bring herself to do that. I think if I'd suggested—or been able to suggest—anything definite she might have done it; but she didn't know what she could do to earn a living if she left him. And then of

course he was not very constantly at home, and wasn't always in this particular brutal state. It's a curious thing that with such men brutality alternates with a meaningless unreflecting generosity. When he had been away, and even sometimes when he was in London, he would bring her home little hampers of fish, or oysters; or sometimes remnants of material that she could make dresses from, as she was a clever dressmaker; or fruit and flowers—always grapes during the winter, and when they were to be had he'd bring in great loads of squashy strawberries, running through the paper bags. He'd do that sometimes when he was most drunk, and come in crying with a kind of copious watery love for her, the most disagreeable sight you can imagine, sentimental and loathsome. . . . She'd then have to put him to bed, and sometimes she'd sit up all night—just because she couldn't go into the bedroom where he was. I was terribly sorry for her, and the more sorry because I didn't seem able to do anything to help her. She'd sometimes be crying when she came up to me, and all I could ineptly say would be, 'For goodness' sake, don't cry, Minnie,' and dab her eyes with my handkerchief. There wasn't anything else, you see, I *could* do. So that gradually we slipped into a kind of wretched bewildering affection—poor enough, but quite genuine, because we were both unhappy and lonely. . . ."

"Stephen darling!" gasped Priscilla. "I can't . . . can't bear any more. . . ." She was convulsively gripping his hand while his dry voice went on, as if wearily, repeating the plain tale he had resolved to tell.

"You'd better let me finish, my dearest," he begged. "You'll think perhaps I'm trying to make an elaborate defence of myself? I'm not trying to do that at all. I'm only telling you exactly what happened. Well, you remember that you wrote to me to beg my pardon for the quarrel. . . . I hate seeming to mix you up in this;

but I'm bound to explain about that letter and my answer to it, because it's all a part of that particular time. When I got your letter I was nearly frantic. It was such a friendly little letter and made me see you so clearly, reminding me of all the happiness we'd had together. You remember that I didn't answer it for several days. That was because I was struggling with myself. I didn't know, and couldn't think, what on earth to do. But I thought that as I'd broken with you, as there had been a definite break, it would mean only more and more pain to go on seeing you—whether often or seldom—once I had realized that I loved you and couldn't hope ever to offer you anything that you could possibly accept or your mother and father consider for a moment. I deliberately abandoned you and myself. If I'd thought for a moment that you loved me I couldn't have done it. I want you to believe that because it is the strict truth. But I never supposed it possible. Somehow when I thought of you I always felt so entirely base, as though the ugly life I'd had had somehow become ingrained in me as if it were grime . . . while you were like some lovely little girl that I could hardly bring myself to touch in case I might soil you. I know it was morbid to think that; but you see I was bound, living the isolated life I did, to be rather morbid. But that wasn't the whole of it. You'd seemed to me so always completely apart from any idea of sentimentality—so frank and friendly, that I couldn't think you loved me. I thought you just rather reluctantly liked me. I tried often to put a construction of love in my memories of your manner, or what you had said; but I never could convince myself. I always came back to the certainty that any thought of love between us was quite out of the question. So I wrote back at last, after I'd painfully thought the whole thing through and through until I was sick of thinking—what you must have thought a brutal letter—and said I thought I'd better not come,

that I forgave, and begged forgiveness, but that I couldn't come yet as I was so busy . . . meaning all the time never to come back.

"And then I turned to Minnie Bayley. I used to go down to her sitting-room last thing at night for supper before going to bed, because she had a fire and I couldn't afford to keep a fire in after the children went to bed, even if we'd had one during the evening; because, although I was making more money than I'd ever made before, the old man made such inroads on it that I was still obliged to be parsimonious. So I used to go down to Minnie's sitting-room, and we used to sit by the fire and have our supper together, often in the light of the fire. And when we did that it was only natural that we should seem to be quite alone in the house. Sometimes we used to hear the old man going up the stairs, past our closed door, rather unsteadily. . . . We used to listen over our shoulders, and laugh with great whispered hushing and warning, and keep very quiet, until we seemed to become secret, as though we shared some deep secret, and from that we grew almost furtive, as though we were doing surreptitious wrong, and knew guiltily that we were doing wrong. That used to make us laugh in whispers, and we grew bolder. It drew us together—the fact that we mustn't be heard or seen. . . .

"Priscilla . . . I only stayed with her once, for all this. But for that I could still feel quite wholly innocent towards you, in spite of all my blundering; but I want you to believe that it was never more than once. And even so it was stupid and ridiculous in its occasion. . . . She had suffered a great deal all one evening from toothache and was nearly mad. I'd done everything I knew; run out and bought chloric ether, and oil of cloves, and put hot fomentations on her face. . . . We'd tried everything we could think of, and she still cried with the pain —cried in my arms. And then the pain suddenly went

with two or three great throbs, and she said I had cured her; and we began laughing together in our secret way, shamefaced and . . . Dearest, I'm afraid you think I'm luxuriating in the details. I can feel your hand quite cold. I'm not luxuriating. But I really *am* defending myself now, desperately."

"Oh, Stephen!" cried Priscilla, in a dreadful voice. "*Don't* defend yourself!"

"Very well, dear. I'll simply tell you. After that—you must remember that it happened years ago—I used not to go downstairs for a time, because I felt guilty. I expect I was simply a coward; but at that time I thought that with the temptation constantly there I was exercising wonderful self-restraint in resisting it. The alternative was to go away, take her to live with me, and desert the children—Dorothy and Roy. I couldn't do that. So I worked always upstairs, and had my supper alone. Then of course Minnie suffered further from my behaviour, from feeling that I didn't any longer care for her; and she began to think I'd been all the time a deliberate intriguer, whereas she had only drifted into temptation because she genuinely . . . liked me. I had to explain the whole business; and we agreed that we'd been unwise in doing what so clearly in retrospect was shown to be leading inevitably to our ruin. But we remained friends and gradually slipped back into our old friendship, but without the sentimental amorousness that we'd begun to hanker after. She behaved very well indeed. You mustn't think she's a weak woman or a bad lot: she's a real woman, as I hope you'll one day care to see for yourself. Though I don't any longer feel any least sort of liking for her. . . . It was then that I began really to admire her, because she was so game. She accepted my weakness, and pretended to read into it some manly virtue that I never dreamt of claiming; and never showed, or allowed me to see, any of the suffering that I'd caused her by

my stupidity. I only guessed at it. So time went on, and Bayley one day decided that as he'd got some other thing in view he'd move away from Islington. Since then I've seen Minnie twice—once at our flat in Islington, and once at her new rooms somewhere over Stoke Newington way, where I went to see her. The first time was on the night I came to Totteridge again for the first time after our quarrel; and that was for only a few minutes in the company of others. The second time was when I went to tell her of our engagement. . . .

"And I think that's the whole story as it affects Minnie, Priscilla."

iii

Priscilla was quite silent. She did not look up at him. She might have been made of stone.

"As far as the old man is concerned, there is this to tell. Before she came to the flat the time that I saw her, Minnie sent me a note, saying: 'You haven't been to see me in my new flat. *Do* come,' or something to that effect. I never got that letter. The old man took possession of it and retains possession of it. Very likely it pleased him to think he was becoming acquainted with my affairs. He apparently has told Bayley, or more probably has ***not*** told Bayley, of the contents of this letter, which as far as I can tell is in no sense incriminating; and he wrote to me while we were at the bungalow——"

"I remember," said Priscilla in a cold voice. Stephen could feel her shivering within his arm.

"Saying that I must do something (of a pecuniary nature) to avoid being cited as a co-respondent. Of course such a thing is the merest blackmailing bluff, and it's quite absolutely out of the question—absurdly impossible; but he may try to get money from your father by threatening some unpleasant disclosure——"

"Stephen: father mustn't hear of it!"

"I don't think the old man will tell him."

"He *mustn't!*" She was consumed with agitation at such a thought.

"My dear. The old man only wants money. His desire to injure me is only a secondary consideration. Or so I think. He might injure me by going to your father with wild threats; but your father isn't a fool, and *is* much more of a man of the world than I am; so he wouldn't be blackmailed. He would certainly, for your sake, dislike the whole thing, and he would think you had a right to feel yourself injured; but to me as an individual, bearing in mind the time that has passed, the extreme unlikelihood of any such discovery being made and used against me, he would quite as certainly not be severe, because he would perfectly recognize the circumstances and their factors. Besides, dear, the letter I've written to the old man this evening will most likely stop the whole thing as far as he's concerned. You're not to worry about that. I'm quite able to deal with it. The only thing for you is the fact, and I've now told you that quite without reserve. The fact, and the way in which it may affect your feelings for me. But there's one point I hope you won't altogether leave out of account. There isn't anything—any other thing in my whole life—that you couldn't be quite sure of. Apart from this one thing—which is fully four years old—I've done nothing that I should be ashamed for you to discover by accident or for yourself. What I've told you is the truth."

Priscilla withdrew her arm from his knee, her head from his hand. She was as if dazed.

"Yes, Stephen," she said, in an unsteady voice, as though she were trembling with cold. "I quite understand. Not any more to-night. I couldn't—really couldn't bear to talk to-night. I shall go to bed now. . . . But I feel as though my heart were frozen up."

She was going away from him when she suddenly checked herself and came back, holding her face up like a tired child for his good-night kiss. For a moment, speechless, they stood embraced; and then she was gone. Stephen turned back and rested his head on his arms, leaning against the mantelpiece. Both were coldly, dully unhappy, as though day would not dawn on the morrow —as though this were one of the dead moments in life which, when they occur, seem to promise no ultimate recompense. To both, such an estrangement was the worst punishment that could with the greatest ingenuity have been devised.

CHAPTER XV: AFTERWARDS

i

THAT night Priscilla did not sleep at all. At first she was too coldly unhappy to cry, and afterwards she was too proud. Everything upon which she had so confidently counted had failed her, and she was bitterly alone. By an irony, the one person to whom she could turn for love and sympathy was Stephen, who had injured her. For a time she was deeply shocked by the sense that the whole of her ungrudged gift to Stephen had been sullied—that he himself had been soiled—which made of marriage something that to him was less of a sacred rite and more of a current experience to be taken in his stride. It spoilt everything to think that he was less innocent than she was herself. Upon that one belief she had based so much of her joy. Then there followed the understanding that equally shocked her confidence in him—that he had been dealing with this matter, secretly and unconfessed, since their marriage and even upon their honeymoon. He had practised, from whatever motive, but from a motive first of all that seemed to her to have been fear, a wretched duplicity. Priscilla took Stephen's story very hard. If he could deceive her, if she were only one woman in his life, she felt she had nothing more to say to him. It was as though one should find a love all upon one side. She, undoubting, had come to him with all her heart alive and fresh with trust: he became, in her thoughts at this time, a sinister figure cynically taking her innocence as so much virgin sport, dishonouring her. . . .

Very quietly, with an extreme stealth, she turned from side to side, restless and incapable of resting. She could not think of anything for the dumb pain that was at her

heart. Her thought was only, "Oh, how *could* he! how *could* he!" and all those other passionate knowledges and reactions swept through her conscience unexpressed. Did Stephen sleep? *Could* he sleep? Holding herself very still she listened for his breathing as he lay so quietly beside her. She could hear nothing. He must be sleeping. He had told his story, without hesitation, without any appeal for her kindness; and when that was done and her happiness destroyed he could sleep as if there had been nothing to interrupt their peace. How terrible! How impossible that he could understand the feelings he had aroused in her. As she listened she thought she could hear a deep, suppressed sigh; but then there was again silence, and the dull ejaculations of her wounded heart absorbed her. It was her hour of extremest pain, a pain that racked her spirit as nothing else could ever do. The feeling that she was betrayed, that she could not now trust anybody in the world, was poignantly hers. When she tried to steady her mind, to ask herself for some calmer mood of charity, such a demand was brushed away by the swift indignation, the horror, that thrilled her each moment in fresh gusts of dismay. It was useless for Priscilla to try to see coolly the causes or the consequences of Stephen's silence and the newly told story. She hated Stephen; because he had made their marriage an ugly reality. They were not married. She didn't love him. With that sort of cold anger she repelled the thought of him. It was such pride that kept her from crying; and if she had cried she must have turned blindly to Stephen and found a miserable unstable relief in his arms.

So the night passed and the early morning came with the blithe chirpings of the birds in their little garden. She heard them before she knew that it was day, and then she watched the pale cool light come gently through the curtains and tint the walls. She knew that the dew was still shaking the tender grass, and felt the slow

beams of the rising sun growing warmer until all that fresh chill of the morning had passed and the bright hot day had already begun. It was a day, she felt, so clear, so free from any cloud, as to make more wretched the sorrow within doors. . . . And in thinking that, she allowed her eyes to close again, and fell suddenly into a heavy sleep. It was not until much later that she awoke, with the sun shining full into the room; and Stephen was no longer in bed.

What was she to do? What was there she *could* do? It was an insoluble question. She was only so tired, so entirely weary of her aching thoughts, that she longed to sleep again. Her head was throbbing, her eyes were heavy. And she must somehow face Stephen. Somehow she must decide what she was to do. It was too much trouble to decide upon anything! It meant too much more pain!

Priscilla turned and buried her face in the pillow, pressing her arms tightly about her head, and lying there in a sort of lethargic suspension of thought. She was enduring the passing of that dreary moment. And it was while she lay thus that Stephen returned.

"Come, dear." She heard his voice close to her. He was there. She could not move. It was impossible for her to move. She could not bear him to see her face. She felt his hand laid gently upon her shoulder. "Dearest, if you take it so badly you'll be ill. Punish me, if you like; be cruel to me. But don't be hard with yourself." Priscilla could hear his earnest entreaty. It shook her pride: she had not, she never had had, the desire to punish.

"Oh, Stephen: I'm so wretched!" It was her confession, pitifully and inevitably the turning to him for consolation; and she was in his arms, her face pressed to his, and her eyes filled with tears. She began to cry quietly, while Stephen hushed her.

"My dear old girl. My dear old kiddie," he was saying in his own weary voice, as though he too were miserable; and Priscilla pressed her face to his the more passionately, although she did not understand the words and only heard the murmur of his voice.

ii

But when, later, Priscilla came downstairs, wan and listless, there was constraint between them. She averted her eyes, and Stephen could not bear to speak to a Priscilla so new, so frigid. His glance had no fear: he was sternly composed until she should be ready to relax her reserve. Priscilla had not forgiven, would not forgive; she did not even yet understand. The Stephen who had comforted her was her lover, her husband; not that other Stephen, whom she did not recognize, who had wronged her. To Priscilla that relation was a bewilderment. She found her heart softening, swelling, as though it must burst; and to this dear Stephen that she loved she knew of no hostility. It was only to that other Stephen, the collected narrator of unspeakable injuries to her love, that her heart was forever closed. It was never that she weakly wished not to have heard the truth about Minnie Bayley, or about the letters. She had no feeling of that kind. Nor any feelings at all about Minnie Bayley. It was as though Minnie did not exist. During Stephen's explanation she had had a hot flush of vision, had seen a something that was Minnie Bayley; but it had faded at once and was as dead as a used firework. Minnie did not again occur to her. Minnie's part in the matter did not seem to have any importance. Nor had that far distant action of Stephen's except as a dull horror to her. It was not as an action that it horrified her; but as an invasion of her own joyous life, an ugly blot upon all her own generous naïveté. But still uglier, she came to think, was

the duplicity which had touched even the days of their honeymoon. She duly recalled all her eager wishes for some extraordinary culminating confession to Stephen—a desire frustrated by the innocent fact that there was nothing to confess but her love for him, which she had frankly told a hundred times. All that time, when they had seemed beautifully to trust one another, he had been deceiving her. The thought brought blank despair. It was the one thing that she had surely known would break her happiness.

That, however, was one Stephen. There remained the other whose loving heart she still believed in. It was as though there must be two Stephens. The Stephen she loved—the Stephen she hated. The Stephen whose arms had comforted, the Stephen whose silence had betrayed. And which Stephen sat opposite her? The bad one or the good one? She dared not raise her eyes; she knew too well that the whole Stephen was alert for her every gesture, not watchful, but subtly aware. That was where she was torn between straining embarrassments. She loved and she hated, and the whole Stephen gravely knew of her conflicting distresses. She could not hide that from herself. If he was more guilty than herself he was also more wise. He understood her. Cruelly and mercifully, shrewdly and wonderingly, he was regarding her. What could she do?

He spoke; and the sound of his voice startled Priscilla.

"Would you rather I didn't stay at home to-day, dear?" he asked. Ah! they had been going for a walk together. How it stabbed her! Yes; but he would have gone with his secret. She would have talked believing him so clearly her own, as she was his; and Stephen would all the time have had his secret. She bent her head still lower under his glance, miserably.

"I don't know, Stephen," she made answer, truthfully enough; and sharply sighed. "We should have gone if

you *hadn't* told me." It was her first note of grinding anger—something quite far from her thoughts.

"But you see I've told you, Priscilla. I only want you to decide. I thought you might feel you couldn't bear to go—even to talk to me."

"I *hate* your pity!" she cried. She rose from the table. "For that's what it is. Anything's better than pity! If only you would . . ." She stood looking at the hearth, her lips trembling, and Stephen also rose, but came no nearer. Then she turned, and their eyes met quite firmly.

"It's not my love you're doubtful of?" he questioned.

"Oh, no." Priscilla's voice quivered, even in that assurance.

"Or your own?"

She hesitated a moment. Unhappiness, she knew, comes of imperfect love. Was her own love true? Her thoughts were unsteady: she had no confidence. Oh, but Stephen *knew* she loved him.

"I don't think you're afraid of that," she said in a low voice.

"Very afraid," said Stephen. "It's all I care about."

"You don't seem to care," Priscilla faltered very slightly, "about my . . . my happiness."

"My dear," answered Stephen, warningly, "you're not thinking about mine."

It shocked her. It was like an icy blow. It was a true thing. She looked at him with horror in her eyes at such a sudden attack. Had he so soon begun to revolt against her judgment? Had she so soon begun to judge him?

"No," she exclaimed. "No . . . I'm sorry, Stephen." After a moment she continued, with no irony whatever: "I know you're thinking all the time about me—wanting me to see everything in some detached way that would deaden all the feeling. But that only makes it all the harder. You see . . . all the time we were away you

knew. And you knew I didn't know. I don't think I envy you your conscience."

"You needn't envy me any peace of mind," said Stephen gravely. "For I hadn't any."

She looked piercingly at him, with a sort of dreadful scorn.

"Do you think you had any right to any?" she asked. If Stephen was pale, so was Priscilla. She was trembling again, as though the day had chilled her. She stood forlornly before him, indescribably wretched. Whenever she spoke, or tried to speak, it was as though her tongue could not form the words, or her trembling lips frame them. "You seemed . . . oh, you seemed content enough. . . ."

"Seemed . . . seemed!" cried Stephen. "Would you believe that I'd never been so happy? Why, I'd never been happy before. Priscilla, you know that. No: I won't talk in that way. My dearest, I wish I might explain one thing. . . . There's the danger that you'll think me only callous. I *won't* believe that. Will you listen?" She inclined her head. Almost, she made a movement towards him, so embarrassed was she at their coldness when her heart longed only to put away the dividing barrier. He resumed: "When I came to Totteridge I didn't expect ever to see you again. It seemed impossible. You know how we spoke. You see that I couldn't have said anything then. . . . Afterwards I simply wanted to marry you. Would the knowledge have made any difference? Why shouldn't you have believed in me? I wasn't a criminal. That I'll never admit. If I'd ever been untrue to you—even in thought—I should have felt bound to tell you; but that was never the case. Never. I've never been untrue to you. You've been the only woman . . . Oh, but you *know* it. . . ."

For a moment he paused. She thought to herself: "I

wasn't untrue to him. I was as unhappy. Why should it be different?" Then Stephen went on:

"We'd been away a week before I knew that my father . . . knew anything, or that he'd try to interfere. When he wrote—you remember the letter—I had to choose between telling you that instant and poisoning our honeymoon, and leaving the story until now or later. There was no question of my never telling you. You know that. I didn't choose silence from cowardice of that sort: I have never been afraid to tell you——"

"No!" Priscilla did not say the word. It was not uttered. It was there; and both knew it.

"I deliberately wanted you to feel the honeymoon perfect. You *did* feel it so: and no feeling you may have now about my being silent can affect that. As for me, you know what it meant to me. Besides, my happiness was in you. I quite admit that. You hadn't any secret. . . . I now have no secret. This moment, now that I have told you, is the first moment of real ease I've had since the old man's letter came. I'm miserable. You'll never believe I'm as miserable as you, though it is so. But at least I'm free of a burden. You know everything: you don't yet dislike me, though you hate what I've told you. To me that's enough. If you'd felt loathing—repulsion—I know that everything would have been lost. I dreaded that. But when you can again believe in my honesty——"

"How *could* I?" cried Priscilla, flushing deeply.

"You do already."

"No. I don't. I feel cheated—tricked. It's horrible!" Vehemently she flung the words at him. "How can you say that so coolly!"

"You must remember I knew this was bound to happen."

"Then you've calculated it! It's all foreseen!" Passionately Priscilla checked her wild outburst. "Oh,

Stephen . . . it's more than I can bear!" She feverishly left the hearthrug and turned away from him. "When I trusted you so! Can't you see how horrible it is—what a betrayal? I don't believe you can. If you could see, you couldn't talk of it so calmly. You *couldn't!*"

"It's because I see, that I'm trying to be calm. I knew I had to tell you. I knew it would be hateful. I'm not really cool. Surely I don't look like anybody callous!"

"Then I can't understand," she said bitterly. "I never *shall* understand!"

"You do understand. But you can't bring yourself to admit it. You're quite wise and generous enough to understand. Your heart's clear."

"You're relying on *my* love!" she cried. "To make up for everything!"

"Yes."

Priscilla looked at him as he stood with his back to the window. He was very white, and the lines upon his face were not, in that light, very noticeable. But his eyes were glowing, and the weary carriage of his head was a sign to her that he was exhausted. She sighed again, with a sharp depth that shook his self-control. Involuntarily he exclaimed and came to her side. Even so, he hardly heard her painful murmur.

"I think you're asking too much of my love. Quite too much. I can't tell you how bad I feel. Just forsaken. I'd built so much . . . Oh, Stephen! How can I *bear* it!"

They were quite close together, and his hand touched her elbow. She did not flinch, and he put his arm gently round her. Still Priscilla made no motion. Her body was stiff and unyielding within his arm.

"You can bear it by trusting me," he said, very low. "Only by trusting me." Abruptly he dropped his arm again, though he remained otherwise in the same position,

steadily regarding her. "And you can trust me if you trust yourself. . . . That's always the main thing."

His eyes were unreadable. Priscilla hardly heard what he said. She was too greatly troubled to make any response. After a moment's pause he took up his papers again from the side table, and went out of the room, leaving her in the same unhappy state of bewilderment, hopeless of the future, which seemed wholly dark.

PART THREE

THE STORY OF THE CHASTE WIFE

CHAPTER XVI: DREAD

i

THERE are some places which one always remembers in sunshine. Some towns—for example the City of Glasgow—it is permitted to remember invariably in rain; but that is very likely an unhappy fact, and not a freak of memory. On the other hand, Glaswegians may find some other peculiarity to recall joy. They may think of the many tramcars, or the interminable length of Sauchiehall Street, or the shuttered silence of dismal Sundays. There are compensations everywhere—even, one must suppose, in Glasgow. At any rate the Glaswegians, when rebuked for their city, are often heard to refer defensively to some supreme ugliness in Manchester which restores their ruffled complacency, and makes of Glasgow a comparative Paradise. But there are other places—such as Richmond (in Surrey—not the crumbling Richmond of the north), or Brighton, or some pretty towns and villages in the southwest of England—which are never, in retrospect, seen otherwise than in sunshine. To Stephen Moore one such place was Hampstead Heath. It is open to anybody to say that when it rained at Hampstead Stephen simply wasn't there, that he stayed indoors, or that he was at present no more than a summer visitor. Why, however, should we rob him of his illusion? It was part of his love for Hampstead, the love that is perhaps born in every Cockney.

Hampstead certainly has its beauties and its associations. It was not merely the home of Jack Straw or Dick Turpin, as one might be led to suppose from a cursory glance at the Spaniards Road. From time to time it has sheltered many poets and artists, and if it continues to do so there are obvious and commendable

reasons for the fact into which it is now unnecessary to inquire. One such reason is that it is the nearest piece of really open land to the heart of London. It is no more than five or six miles from the very centre of the city, and yet it is a wide and beautiful heath, unspoiled for all who are not misanthropists. And upon weekdays (excepting Saturdays) even misanthropists can prowl there unmolested. Moreover, apart altogether from the heath, there is in the suburb of Hampstead proper such a confusion of small alleys and winding hilly streets that the heart of man is charmed within him. Outside the range of Hampstead there are horrible attachments, such as South Hampstead, and West Hampstead, called by these names, probably, as Mr. Belloc's book was called *Caliban's Guide to Letters,* "for purposes of sale." With these the lover of Hampstead will have no concern. When he speaks of Hampstead he means a small circle from the upper end of Rosslyn Hill, Church Road, Frognal, The Grove, West Heath Road, "The Bull and Bush," "The Spaniards," the Vale of Health, and round again (at the very farthest) by Pond Street into Rosslyn Hill. He means, on the whole, a radius of something much less than a mile turning slowly round, as on a pivot, from the middle of Heath Street. That, in spite of all house-agents and railway companies (a romantic brood), is what is meant by Hampstead. What is *not* meant by Hampstead is that kind of outer district made up of Golders Green and Fortune Green and Finchley Road and Swiss Cottage and Chalk Farm and Gospel Oak. The large outer Hampstead is a privileged area; but it is not what one means by Hampstead. Far from it. And when Stephen thought of Hampstead in sunshine he had no intention of denying rain to Gospel Oak. He did not imagine a parched Chalk Farm. For all he cared Swiss Cottage might be a swamp, and the West End Lane a flooded area.

ii

It was thus a typical sunshiny day upon the heath when Stephen, leaving their home, went out of doors for the sake of Priscilla's relief. The sun shone—not fiercely, as it does in the less breezy days of midsummer; but with a gentle warmth that charmed the air. Dogs barked by the White Stone Pond, pretending that they were at the seaside, and a man had just driven his horse into the pond, so that its legs were wetted and so that the red wheels of his cart flashed and glittered in the sunshine. Very few people were out; but there were one or two men lounging against the white rail that runs between the road and the steep descent to that part of the heath which becomes the Vale of Health. Upon that day there was no noise from the Vale; but of course it is on Bank Holidays that this is the very centre of the tumult. Here may be seen the coco-nut shies, and the heavy hammer, and the vigorous dancing; and here may be heard the conflict of all those wheezy accompaniments to the so thrilling roundabouts. But upon this day there came no faintest hint of the joys that lay a month ahead, when, for a day, pandemonium should reign. Stephen gave a glance among the trees and turned away. He could from such a vantage-point see over the open land to Hendon and beyond. He thought he could see the "Welsh Harp," that famous scene of revelry celebrated in Mr. Albert Chevalier's song, where great sheets of gloomy water are supposed to tempt the oarsman. Nearer to him was the West Heath, all curiously seamed in its bareness by what might almost be cataclysmic causes. His eye ran over the scene, but not with any freshness of perception. He was merely noticing the familiar points. It interested him extremely; he saw it all, and it was mirrored upon his mind; but he did not feel any sudden pulse of emotion, as some people do when the scene is beautiful or familiar.

Such emotion was ruled out by his temperament no less than by his preoccupation. He observed intensely: he recognized: he did not passionately enjoy. He was thinking about Priscilla.

iii

As he walked, with his eyes bent upon the rough pathway, Stephen became intensely aware of the tiny particles of which it was composed. As his foot touched the earth it was soft to his tread and, since the dew had been heavy, showed a light impress. Thousands of feet had trodden, and would tread, over this spot, each leaving such a mark and obliterating other marks made earlier, so that the surface of the earth was continually moulded by these obstinate pressures. And yet, in spite of such assaults, the modification over a large area was imperceptible. The process of recovery was too incessant. The steps of man might indeed wear the earth bare of grass, as they had done; but they could not change its character, or seriously modify its contour. This heath remained as testimony to the earth's victory. Was that true also of human beings in the mass? He thought so: he thought them at heart unchanged and unchangeable. That was a part of his outlook upon life. He was conservative in his scepticism of apparent change. There was no change, no progress; only there were the superficial modifications of times and manners. He wanted conditions changed—economic conditions in the modern world—but he had no hope of any radical movement even there. The tyranny of conditions, he thought, was manifold, as strangling and ineradicable as the bindweed. Those who thought differently from himself he divided into classes—of fanatical optimists; of churchmen engrossed with the machinery of their faith; of all those practical men, such as soldiers, engineers, and sportsmen, who occupy themselves seriously with routine and the things next their

hand; of charlatans, such as all makers of laws and practices; of those whose lives are never galled by the tyranny of such practices; and of those who endure it with such facility and acceptance that if it were removed they would collapse from sheer loss of equilibrium. Those who ransacked the secrets of the earth he admired for their devotion and as adding to the sum of human knowledge; he never ceased to regard all efforts after knowledge as exemplifications of the highest aim within the grasp of man. That was the way in which his desire was to learn, so that his knowledge might be a sort of living organism, vitally capable of sure judgment of the subject in which he had, by natural bent, so devotedly specialized. The search for knowledge, material, æsthetic, emotional, spiritual, was his religion; the impulses for personal or collective domination, for continual reshuffling of the same old pack of cards, for securing group adhesions to particular ideas, were anathema to him. Stephen, it will be seen, was an individualist; but how far his idea of life was the result and how far it was the cause of his normal temper, his actions, and his general contact with personal affairs, is a question too difficult to be settled in a story which does not pretend to give a full-length portrait. It is enough for us that his love for Priscilla was as deep and as rational as his religion as here outlined. It was a passionate love; but it was not an irrational love. That was why, when he walked across the heath and out towards the farther country upon this fine summer day, when the slow, burning heat of the sun was gently tempered by light and hesitant breezes, he did not altogether lose heart.

iv

Stephen went for a very long walk during the hours that followed, turning over in his mind many many

things that he had thought forgotten or never remembered. He was for a time quite disposed to argue with himself, urging his own defence and rigorously impeaching his own sincerity. He furthermore visualized Priscilla as she had been when he left the house, dispirited and miserable; and be sure the memory was the worst part of his own pain. He went over the heath, and through Finchley to Totteridge and Barnet; and then, without plan, and only because he had made the journey before, he turned off to Shenley and Radlett, and even beyond, until he began to feel tired. The farther he went the more did the country reveal its incessant beauties to his eyes, mingling with and unsuspectedly sweetening his thoughts. The roads, the trees, the earth, the air, the sky, and the disentangleable sounds—all these changed the tenor of his thoughts and served for a time to relieve his unhappiness and to awaken in him a new sensation and a new possibility of peace. The walking, although it tired him, did Stephen good: the solitariness enabled him to clarify his thoughts. Alone he could think without the confusion that arises from the criss-cross of starting ideas; and to his considerations all the beauties of the day blended together into a harmonious background.

During the whole of the day, when he was away from the main roads, Stephen saw practically nobody; for all were at their daily work. The houses he passed were all silent, the blinds sometimes drawn to exclude the sun. A sleepy cart lurching over the uneven roads, with the driver dozing within it, he occasionally met, and was forced to stand aside while the great wheels went grumbling past him. In the meadows cows stolidly munched, whisking their tails over their flanks to drive away intruding flies. Otherwise he saw nothing but the day. . . .

And all the time he was thinking. . . . If only Priscilla could bring herself to believe that she was everything

to him. If only she could see that he had destroyed the old man's letter from anger, and not from fear. If she could believe those two things she would still love him as she had done. Of what use were his assurances if she did not instinctively, intuitively believe that he would do nothing, *could* do nothing, from motives of abject secretiveness such as he knew many people would acknowledge. Surely she would believe in his good faith? That phrase was the clue to the whole situation. His good faith. Stephen admitted to himself all shortcomings; but his honesty of intention he would yield to nobody. If Priscilla did not believe in that, they were eternally separate. Surely she believed in it? Just as he believed in her. Did he wholly believe? Had he no doubt? Not one: he believed absolutely in her. His belief was unshakable. . . .

So ran his thoughts, wearily, monotonously, but gaining steadily in clearness and in a sort of steady simplification which brought him nearer to some understanding of the vital point of feeling upon which Priscilla and he were divided. He walked on, looking neither to the right nor to the left, stern and inflexible. No fear was in his heart; nor any pride; but only the stubbornness of his rational spirit, which refused to admit the value of feeling in moral relations.

Then, when the afternoon was come and the sun was past the meridian, glowing in intenser warmth, he began his return journey among the dusty lanes, and his limp grew more noticeable, and his eyes more fixed. When he was tired Stephen always showed it by this same fixity, which seemed to enlarge the pupils of his eyes and made shadows come under his cheekbones: and the two marks always gave an indefinable air of anxiety to his expression. His face became paler beneath the dark curling hair that grew still so thickly and offered such opposition to the brush. Nevertheless, he sometimes whistled as he

walked, tramping steadily down the solitary lanes, his shoulders slightly hunched because of his preoccupation. The lanes were bordered and deeply scented by banks and hedges rich with the green of early summer: and sometimes Stephen heard a magical runnel of water which seemed by its tinkle to freshen the heavy air and wash the traveller's sense of dustiness away. It was, in spite of June rain, a very fine summer; July found the land still unspoilt by the sun, and there would presently be some more steady fertilizing rain before the later heats browned the verdure and ripened the crops. Over Stephen's head as he walked was the clear sky, sometimes entrancingly seen through the foliage of tall trees; under his feet the dust rose in little puffs, slowly scattering back to its old level after he had passed. The air was full of the subdued buzzing of bees and the bright chirping of finches and the inexhaustible pipe of the blackbird. From every quarter came the sweet droning that the Londoner finds always in his ears when he remembers the byways outside the city area. It was the long, the endless undercurrent of the exquisite day.

Stephen saw and heard without seeing and hearing, so full was his mind of its own insoluble problem. The day was not his: it was given over to the unhappy memories and forebodings which the situation had created.

V

It was late in the afternoon when he reached Edgware, and his journey thence was simple enough. A passage by tram-car left him only a short distance to walk in the dusk which was now gathering. He climbed the hill to the west heath, and saw, upon all the roads bordering the heath, pale lights starting into life against the opal sky. So pale were they, and so lingering was the daylight, that it seemed almost as if the lamps were mere

yellow spots in a brighter light. Still the sky was clear, beautiful in its fairness. Stephen could no longer be unaware of the beauty of light among the leaves, and with such a sky overhead. It thrilled him, as a vision might have done. But also it wounded him, and he bent his glance upon the ground, now so mysterious in all the evening's capricious shadows. He would not at first see the untroubled loveliness of this day's closing mood. It mocked him.

And as he went higher upon the hill, with every step bringing home perceptibly nearer, Stephen slackened his pace, with a dull sudden hopelessness at his heart. What was he to find? Priscilla alone, still sad, still overwhelmed? Anything but composure! he prayed. For that would mean exclusion. It was his dread that she might close her heart to him. . . . He loved her so much that he did not need to tell himself of his love: it was part of his being. Priscilla did not know more of his moods, of the infinitesimal changes in his bearing, than he knew of hers. He could think closely about her every variety of manner, for his observation was unerringly woven from minute to minute, pliant and sure, not less pervasive because it was made more acute by love. He knew that she was wholly true; as true as steel, tempered finely by her inexpressible love of virtue.

His good faith! Her love of virtue! Suddenly, as he paused in the greying light, he was aware of this quick clarification. Those, for the first time seen by him, were the principles in conflict. He clearly saw them, and was led to contrast their implications. *On the one side reasonable acknowledgment of imperfection and a strict sense of rectitude. On the other passionate chastity of deed and thought, in no way self-righteous or exclusive, but religious in its intensity.* . . .

How could he ever hope, in face of such a swift illumination, to approximate the two outlooks, to make them

tolerant of each other? How had he never realized before the absolute difference in grain? Had he all his life worked on false assumptions, or at least upon an ignoble ideal? He stopped, aghast at the revelation, puzzled by its insistence, trying in vain to understand the causes of the mortifying sense of inferiority in ideals.

Stephen became ashamed. It was easier to admit shame to himself at night, here in this quiet road, with the yellow lights growing brighter as the sky darkened. If Priscilla had been with him she too, such was the power of the evening, which so greatly had affected him, would have been humbled. Their lives might from that moment have been even more truly joined than before. With a fresh sensitiveness sprung suddenly into action before him, like a religious ecstasy, Stephen stood quite still in the shadow, looking through the mysterious gloaming at the dark trees; and the eternal beauties of the night breeze and the night shadows were impressed upon his heart. Deeply he sighed, for unhappiness is the key to love as it is the key to beauty; and when Stephen moved again with laggard steps it was with the sense of immeasurable new experience.

Still he mounted, until he stood upon the brow of the hill. Here the silence was gone and his new emotion was rebuffed; for there was already the stir of the evening promenade along the Spaniards Road. Many persons, in summer frocks and flannel suits, strolled or lounged upon the highway or the sidewalk; and there was the confused sound of many tongues. With a dry smile, not wholly disagreeable, Stephen scrutinized the passers, who were now so assiduously engaged in their wandering vanity fair, until he came once more to quietness and the little cottage. Here they had thought to spend so many happy days! Were those days still to be spent, or were they a part of the dream bubble?

There was a faint light in the front room, which

showed him that the gas was alight but that it was lowered. Priscilla, then, was not in the room. He raised his eyes. Nor in the bedroom either. A fear clutched his heart; to be dismissed with a rough intolerance. Such a fear was absurd. He would not for a moment harbour it. No: the explanation was simple and conventional. He opened the gate, and with steady steps went up the path to the door. He could see the brass knocker, and the brass door-handle, shining brilliantly in the dusk.

There was a faint sound at his feet. Romeo sat by the door, pathetically waiting for it to be opened. Involuntarily Stephen smiled.

"Forgotten?" he said, struck even with this incident and its possible significance. With unusual gentleness he sympathetically spoke again. "That's not like her, you know. Is it, now? Poor old chappie!"

He stooped and picked Romeo up in his arms, to receive in acknowledgment the little cat's grateful endearments. Together, and in silence, they entered the house.

From the dining-room there came the sound of voices. Stephen's heart sank once more. It chilled him to think that others would be present at their meeting, struck, perhaps, by any least suggestion of embarrassment upon either side. Yet Romeo, whom he had again set down as he closed the front door, was clearly waiting for admission to the dining-room, with a trustful air against which Stephen was not proof. Hs must open that door, though it would bring them at once face to face, so that he would instantly read her mood . . . her distrust.

It was done. He was inside the room, where were Priscilla and David and Hilary Badoureau. They were talking, and were interrupted by his entrance. Dusty and tired as he was, Stephen stood awkwardly before them, stumblingly acknowledging their greeting. He was dazzled by the fresh light, and he could hardly bear

to look at Priscilla. He noticed that her head was bent. She did not see him. She was stooping to speak to Romeo, who had gone straight, as by right, to her side. Through Stephen's heart there was plunged a stiletto of fatalism. It was over. Something was over, and a change was there. Priscilla would not meet his glance. How he had feared composure! It was the worst!

He did not know how he spoke, how he excused himself; but without being aware of his movements he was once more out of the room, and was upstairs, changing his dusty clothes for other, clean ones. But as he undressed and dressed again he was still conscious of that stabbing recognition of doom. Vainly he reassured himself. It was too late. The avoidance came after his mood of humility, of clarification, when he was disarmed. He was disarmed, helpless; and Badoureau was there. There was a sinister conjunction. Well? For a moment he sat upon the bed staring before him. For the first time he was shaken by a fierce pang of passionate jealousy.

CHAPTER XVII: DIRECTIONS

i

YET he must go down again to where they sat. Whatever happened, whatever the discords and the heartaches, in this life none must be shown, all must be hidden, lest secrets fly and moral gossip be nourished. Stephen descended the stairs. A lethargy was upon him, a failure of energy both mental and physical. The thought of Priscilla's averted glance made him feel sick. He could not now ascribe to her the rational thoughts he had planned. She had become quite incomprehensible. Almost, he dreaded to see her again so soon.

Once in the room his feeling changed abruptly. The very need for behaving normally worked upon him. He was able to speak as he usually did, to listen imperturbably to David's jokes, to accord a faintly constrained attentiveness to Hilary. And he was able to look at Priscilla with an unfaltering eye. How pretty she was! She was a little flushed; her eye was bright. . . . He could see that she also was fighting to behave as usual; and that relieved him. He knew it in a hundred ways. Her very slightly increased and quickened movements; the involuntary swiftness with which she met his glance and looked away; some curious fresh timbre in her voice and in her pretty laughter—all these, so keen was his observation, were the obvious signs of strain. But more, in the expression of her mouth and eyes, in a something unseizable in the curve of her soft cheek, were to be found intimations of her grief. How strange it was that Stephen, feeling so soft and uncertain within, should outwardly appear so entirely without qualm, should outwardly appear master of the situation! How strange, he

was thinking, that these other men should fail to see what his knowledge made so plain!

Half doubtfully he turned to scrutinize the others. Hilary sat upon Priscilla's right, looking very tall and fair and handsome. Had he no inkling? Where a woman saw in Hilary those so admired strengths of will and body and tenacity, Stephen, coldly gazing—yet not so coldly, either—saw self-will, cruelty and a sort of obtuseness that goes with such properties in the English type. He admitted Hilary's beauty, which none could deny, and his extremely pleasant and even flattering manner; but he saw in the frosty eyes and the smileless smile a determination that was inimical to himself. The perception made his own scrutiny the more remorseless. He was still engaged in its exercise when Hilary looked quickly at him.

For only a fraction of time did that encounter last; but Stephen could not help smiling grimly. To his surprise he was no longer at all frightened. For Hilary's look, something apart from his lazy manner, which is the cultivated manner of his type, was one of hostile uncertainty. While Stephen was quietly thinking about Hilary, with a concentration into which he had been trained by long years of close reference of all matters to his unhesitating judgment, Hilary was in some way puzzled about Stephen—was in some great perplexity about his strength, or his nature. The understanding for one reason lightened Stephen's heart. This man was not, it would seem, quite as formidable as he might have been. God grant it might be so! But even as he thought that, Stephen's eyes glinted hardly. He did not fail to perceive behind Hilary's perplexity the cause from which it sprang. It sprang, quite evidently, from something outside a simple interest in himself.

How he wished he could see Priscilla's eyes; read them; read her heart! It came upon him in a flash that

this was intolerable; that David and Hilary were irrelevancies. He cared for nobody but Priscilla. Priscilla was his love. He could not live without her. If her love were lost, of what use was his life, of what use was any life? His will sprang up, stifling his doubts. If her love were lost, still she was his own. In the last resort he would crush her, force her to love him. His teeth gritted in a savage resolve, the bare doggedness of a primitive sense of conquest. Stephen's heart beat so thickly that he could breathe only in short sudden respirations. For a moment, until the savage impulse died down, cruelty was in his face, a vengeful strength plain to any eye. Priscilla must have seen his expression. He saw her look round the circle of faces.

ii

All this time David was carrying on his usual slow commentary upon life and letters. He was discussing politics and currents of events in relation to art, suggesting that English literature immediately before the South African War with one or two exceptions had been pessimistic through sheer exhaustion, and that since the South African War its note had been meliorative rather than optimistic. He was proceeding to refer to the modern renaissance of the Italians in the direction of science rather than in the arts. His talk was suggestive, easy, and humorous. His wary and whimsical survey of his hearers was incessant, for David was a talker, and talkers must always be testing their hold upon an audience.

"Italian music and Italian painting," he was saying, "are both about as bad as they can be. The strength seems to lie in science. You get men like Marconi who are doing really notable things. And he's only a sign of the times. But just compare such strength with the work of a man like Puccini . . . or Mascagni. Terrible,

you know. And in another line d'Annunzio, who's a decadent if ever there was one."

He paused, meditatively; and Hilary, who had been absorbed in thought, broke in:

"Curious how a long suppressed racial aptitude will get its way in the end. You get the modern Italian going right back by a sort of atavism to the practical Roman character . . ." he said, in a large, general, assertive way.

"Oh, surely!" It was Stephen's voice, marked with an unmistakable impatience. "Racial aptitudes! That's all the Gobineau and Max-Müller fallacy—and it's the clear result of a linguistic muddle. It's only an academic idea—there's no reality at the bottom of it."

Hilary started, and flushed. His mouth hardened and his expression changed.

"Really," he murmured, half in protest, half in repression. Challenge in any case would have been unwelcome; but from this man it was intolerable. Stephen, not deigning to look at his opponent, but deliberately laying himself out to combat an idea repugnant to himself, continued:

"You'll find different currents at all times in all nations, all races; but not because of any racial strain. The thing *must* be a matter of time and occasion . . . opportunity . . . infectious impulse. Sometimes this, sometimes that. Walter Bagehot says a rather good thing about variations of that sort. He puts it all down to an admired type. Somebody does a particular thing so as to attract attention. Others follow at once."

"One fool makes many," interpolated David, who was lazily and reflectively enjoying the comedy; but uneasily surmising as to its deeper causes.

Stephen smiled again; but still only with a bitterness that betrayed him to Priscilla.

"Very likely. You can see how it works. Supposing,

for example, all the little . . . sort of particles that gradually, by stages, evolve and coalesce into a definite point in the progress of invention produce some particular thing that meets the urgent need of an age . . . a convention arises. A necessary thing has been done. It stands for ever as a point in evolution. Everybody feels it like a magnet. It swamps everything for a time. The inventor becomes the most admired type. The young brains—imaginations—tend inevitably to explore the reasons; and to desire beyond everything else the advance of that particular study to a farther point. It opens up innumerable possibilities; it's not only an end, but a starting-point for other ideas. Very well. That would explain the rise of ideas; and any such rise means schools of opinion, and a steady pressure of divergent activities. Doesn't that seem reasonable?"

"And I suppose," David said, deliberately withholding any personal expression of opinion, "that with all the rival admired types, rival critical standards, rival followers ad infinitum . . . All the running baggage of an intellectual movement . . ."

"Parasites," agreed Hilary, with a snap. "There are bound to be quidnuncs. You always find such people. Every movement runs to seed and produces theorists and expositors. No doubt there's a half-truth in what Moore says; but he's misled by something that's only a local symptom. It doesn't account for the fact that nations—races—have their quite special aptitudes. One must surely take a larger view."

Stephen felt a cold and wicked glee at this sign of resentment from his enemy. It cooled his own ardour. He hugged his dislike, and even felt his mind newly keen for any form which the inevitable combat might presently take. At present there was no profound conflict of idea or opinion; there was only personal animosity. With such animosity as a root divergencies of opinion

were inevitable. Each wished to indicate disagreement —even contempt; and both were restrained by their company and the circumstances. Each too, it may have been, was affected by a kind of natural interchangeable disdain for the other. But Stephen obviously could not, as host, go very far. He wondered how much Priscilla saw as she sat at the other end of the table listening in silence. However interested she might be, Priscilla would not interpose. She had learnt the power of silence from her mother, who rarely disagreed with anybody, but who never misrepresented her own opinion. And so she did not now take part in the discussion. But Stephen could see her following it with a sweet gravity that became her.

So interested had he now become in this scene and its possible meanings, that he quite lost contact with the subjects upon which David was suavely discoursing. He leaned back in his chair. David was upon his right, also leaning back, with his thin brown face in shadow, his head slightly cocked, and his eyes fixed upon the ash of his cigarette, which he had just dabbed lightly upon a plate. His lips were thin, and his mouth not quite a small one; there was, however, in the smile which hovered—no more—upon his lips something which to Stephen gave him an extraordinary resemblance to Priscilla. What a clever chap David was! thought Stephen, without a pang of envy. There was a confidence, a grace, in his bearing that took the eye, and a faint whimsical air in his speech that was altogether pleasing. Stephen felt that he liked David more than he had guessed, and looked upon the thick brown hair, brushed right back from the forehead, with an affection that was brotherly where it was not paternal or wondering.

"One wonders what the end of it all will be," David was guessing, as he dabbed his cigarette. "What the outcome will be of all this training and rivalry and exploita-

tion of national phases. For they *are* being exploited, you know. Movements—d'you see? Now, Stephen, why shouldn't there be a book on Movements? Going back right behind the manifestations; finding the roots of the Suffrage agitation, and Pan-Slavism (perhaps that's not a problem), and the different engineering traditions, and the Christian faith, and the Roman church, and why young Oxford's becoming Roman Catholic under the influence of an English Catholic. . . . All sorts of things. I see it in weekly parts. What do you think, Stephen?"

Stephen was not listening attentively; but he heard, and replied:

"You might do something. Why don't you do it, yourself? Call it 'Signposts' or 'Signs of the Times,' 'Where are we going?' Then you could have chapters by specialists——"

"Oh! No specialists!" said David. "A single clear mind is better. You get a man who has his own point of view. It's the sort of thing *you* could do."

Stephen started. For the first time such a possibility entered his mind.

"No, no. I couldn't do such a thing," he said, definitely.

"On the contrary: it's a thing you might well do. The more I think of it the more I like the idea. Don't you think he could do it, Priscilla?"

Stephen averted his eyes, his brow furrowed. There was a perceptible pause. Then, with an evident coldness which cut through to his heart and wounded him past forgetfulness, Priscilla answered.

"D'you think so?" she said. "I shouldn't have thought it was the sort of thing for Stephen to do."

It was her tone that hurt Stephen: it held a hostile indifference. Was he mistaken? Eagerly his eyes sought hers. If only Badoureau had not been there!

"Ever so much better," urged David, "than his old scheme of London trampings. That's what I want to get him out of—the idea that he's a hack. Look here, Stephen: I'll go so far as to offer you the job. I'll get my people to write to you about it. . . ."

Stephen was seized with a sudden embittered exultation. His eyes brightened. He turned to Hilary, who was frowning impatiently and looking bored; and thereby was stimulated to reply.

"We'll talk it over," he said, with a supreme defiance of Priscilla. Well, if she was to be hostile, so would he be hostile. He would go his own way. It was his turn to take the lead in such an attitude. His mouth was set in the old defiant fashion. He would not allow himself to be thus publicly humbled by her repressive tone. "Yes, we'll talk it over. Come into the next room. Shall we all go?"

There was a general movement, for Priscilla rose as he was speaking. As he held open the door she passed through without a word or glance; and Stephen paled.

iii

When they were alone—for Hilary had followed Priscilla—David stopped at the door.

"I'm really in earnest," he said. "Why doesn't Priscilla like it?"

"I couldn't do it."

"You could. You *shall* do it. Choose a dozen—twenty subjects. Analyse them. That's what's wanted—analysis. Get to the root of the movements, to the ideas behind them. It's a great notion. Practically it's a survey of current impulses. You've got the clear head; you can write; you know what you think about things. Why not? It's the very thing. Get rid of the idea that you're a hack. You're not. With a little more confidence you could make a brilliant book."

"I'm not a thinker," urged Stephen, remaining still with his fingers pressed upon the door-handle.

"That doesn't matter a rap. If you take any of the men who are talked about you'll see they're not systematic thinkers. Most of them catch up ideas and give them colour. You shall give them the severity of black and white. It's individuality that matters, not system. That's your own idea, isn't it?"

Stephen took his arm, and they both went into the front room, where Priscilla stood talking to Hilary, who had lighted another cigarette. As they entered the room there came at the front door a postman's knock; and Stephen retrieved from the mat a couple of letters. These he had opened when he returned, and they were still in his hand. He spoke quite steadily to David; but one of the letters had been a blow to him.

"Yes," said Stephen, clearly. "I think I'd better have a shot at that." Aside, to David, he said in a low tone; "This letter says *The Norm's* to be stopped—unless they can sell it. Of course that's out of the question, as it's been left so late. Pity!"

David whistled. Priscilla made an uncontrollable step forward.

"What did you say, Stephen?" It was her first direct speech to him. He looked down into her face with the preoccupied glance of one concerned with other matters more important.

"It's nothing," he said, as though she had no business in what concerned him. He felt a curious wonder at her faint flush, which made Priscilla like a solitary rose in that clouded scene. To himself Stephen was saying, not despairingly, but with a sort of dead certainty of fatalism: "I've come a mucker! I've come a mucker! It's all gone now. All I ever had. . . ." Quietly he turned away, seeing nothing and hearing nothing. If he had not married, if he had been still in Islington,

this would have been a blow, but not a stunning blow. He had done wrong, he felt, and this was the consequence, showing in a series of misfortunes. He had left Dorothy—a hazardous realization of what she must be feeling now, without any sense of usefulness, possessed him. He had left Roy. He was breaking Priscilla's heart. All for what? What was the impulse that had led him to such a stage? Was it love for Priscilla? A love that could bring her to this unhappiness? He was coldly dismayed; yet he was all the time conscious that he had not lost his head. He was not hoping anything: he was quite clearly feeling that everything was lost: but he was not in despair. Was it that he was only numbed? With curiosity he found that he had begun to revolve in his mind some of the details of David's scheme. Thought of them diverted his attention from the more pressing anxieties. These slipped into a looming background. He found himself, while the others talked, planning and selecting the typical movements of which he might be said to have any generalized knowledge. They were few; but there were others in which he found sufficient interest for his purpose. The word "direction" was definitely in his mind. In what direction did events tend? Was there any conceivable object or perceptible end in all these tendencies of thought and action which had gained the weakness of adherents? When a tendency became distinguishable, was it not even then dying as the coral insect dies? It fascinated him to think thus. Whither was the world, whither was England, tending? Humanitarianism he found vaguely powerful, opposing dogma everywhere, and slipping into individual justifications of weakness. Wrong sorts of collectivism, barren sorts of individualism, hypocritical conglomerations of mediocrity assuming the air of concerted strength—these next swam into his survey. There was the religious tendency away from thought, and the

opposed intellectualism stiffening into rigidity. There was the exaltation of the more dangerous parochialism known as nationality, with its exploitation of crude common emotions. There was the powerful and still unplumbed element of sex-hatred—the mystifying complex that he could not pretend to understand. There were academic and reactionary theories of government continually advancing and receding under pressure of the general social conflict and the opportunism of the parties. . . . He saw no end to the subjects from which a writer might choose his material for such a book, providing he had the necessary discretion to prevent his work from being the feeble and hot-headed muddle of cantankerous opinion. . . .

Slowly he came back to the group at the other side of the room. He could now quietly watch Priscilla, and observe her most delicate pallor. A shock struck him. If she should be ill! It seemed to him that he wanted her happiness above all things; but it must be a happiness definitely reached through understanding, and not a patched-up happiness obtained by glossing over the shock of his confession. His sense of Priscilla was at this moment poignant. He watched her devouringly, with eyes of passion. What would be the outcome of all this? And what, in God's name, was he to do? With *The Norm* gone, he had no money for their living. His teeth met sharply. With this unhappiness between them, what might not happen? He became consumed with anxiety. Poor Priscilla! Yet not poor, for she had her incomparable sweetness! As swiftly, his mood changed. He must not pity. He had wronged her. What was his feeling? Was it love or hatred? The thought that he might ever hate her was new to him. But when he saw Hilary so near to Priscilla, talking to her so easily, while he perforce must only witness the conversation, he became aware of the distance that separated them. He

was cut off from the others, suffering alone. It did not matter how much *he* suffered. Nobody cared for that. Had he not suffered? His life had been nothing but suffering. Yet he was to be found guilty, and sentenced, as though he were a libertine. . . .

Bitterly did Stephen's thoughts run, corroding his love.

iv

When the others had gone, Priscilla and he stood alone in the room. It was horrible to see her so constrained before him! And while he thought it horrible, while he was heartsick, he was conscious of a savage pleasure in it also, and a kind of indifferent indignation. Why should she be immune from suffering? thought this malignant part of him. He had suffered: why should she not do so? It was life they were in; not a drawing-room game. Priscilla must understand that this was reality, not a charade. Then that emotion was ousted by his deep regret, by the knowledge that he deeply loved her. And again by his cool appreciation of the fact that she was the most beautiful woman in the world, and the truest.

"Stephen," said Priscilla. "I knew that letter was not . . ." She stopped, and came to him. In silence they held each other tightly, face to face, painfully aware of all the difference between them.

"Don't worry about it. It's *The Norm* . . . stopping. Don't worry about that, you know. I've dreaded it for weeks." He was abjectly candid. "I guessed it was coming."

"My dearest . . . and you said . . . You wouldn't have told me."

"Yes. When they were gone. When *he* was gone."

There was silence for a moment. Then Priscilla pulled herself away.

"I love you and I hate you," she said in a strange voice. "And I feel indifferent to you." It was her confession. He could not confess anything: he did not know how to confess. "But I pity you more than anything else at all," she went on.

"Pity! Oh, God help me, Priscilla!"

Stephen was appalled at her words. He looked at Priscilla in a dreadful frenzy. When upon a passionate impulse he would have taken her again into his arms she stepped back, away from him, shaking her head. So for several dead moments, in which the clock's steady ticking cut across the silence, they stood looking at each other, as though their wills were pitted in conflict. Priscilla's head was up, her lips parted, her nostrils pinched as she breathed quickly in such stress of gusty feeling. Then their tension relaxed, with still no word spoken; and they began once more to look away, to look down, both of them chilled with an awkward shame for such unwonted display. . . . With a sharp sigh, Stephen knew that Priscilla was his no longer. She did not trust him. She would console him, be kind to him; but she no longer had that implicit trust in him which had made their love real. Curiously, she was now completely detached from him, and he could no longer read her baffling personality. Without further speech he watched her go out of the room, and he was left solitary.

CHAPTER XVIII: THE TROUGH OF THE WAVE

i

FOR days Stephen went about his ordinary work dealing patiently with everything that arose; and all the time his heart was aching. There was a dull oppression of his spirit that was almost unbearable. He thought of Priscilla with a sensation akin to dread, and of the future with a clear expectation of disaster. He did not dare to look forward beyond the next few weeks. It was as though he expected to die, as though no plans should be made in case they might never come to fruition. If he thought of his work it was with the knowledge that within a month he would be once more what he had been long ago—a common hack, striving only to make a pound or two by laborious performance of worthless duties. His feeling was worse than one of abandonment, for in that there is the vicious delight of surrender. It was the death of hope. It induced in him a doggedness that was more lonely than ever before. Painfully he left the cottage each morning and worked at the British Museum: no longer were there any days at home, or walks, or afternoons of happy leisure. All was work. Sometimes he would spend a day upon writing an article; and the next day, with a groaning desperation, he would destroy what he had written. Once or twice, out of sheer sadness, would arise mysteriously some writing that held a kind of vehement quality; and then he would know that the work was as good as he could do. Odd pieces of work found acceptance: he was still far from failure. When he found that he could work, the work absorbed him, and he would afterwards come forth into the air in a dream of satisfaction. But on the whole he was in despair.

Stephen would sometimes, during the meals in which they talked as though nothing was very much amiss, look suddenly up and catch Priscilla's fleeting expression. She was trying in every way to show him her sympathy; she was never cold to him, as he was to her; Stephen knew that she wanted him to talk to her, to tell her about his work, to behave naturally. Her thought for him was incessant. But it was for that very reason all the less bearable. The sense of being somehow in the wrong worked in his mind so that he felt what was almost a sensation of injury. Her kindness was more paralysing than reproaches would have been; for if she had been reproachful he could have said to himself that she didn't understand . . . that it was all very well to behave like that. . . . He could have found, as men in such case always do find, a sort of dreary bickering satisfaction. But he was denied it. He had no grievance; only the dull hopelessness of their estrangement. And all the time he was thinking that perhaps it would have been better if he had never written that article upon Mr. Evandine's book which had provoked their reunion. He traced everything back to that—no further. That was the starting-point of their present discord. He had then been unhappy, but not with the sense of having made Priscilla also unhappy. It was that new sense which made him feel criminal—the injury to the one he best loved, who was in every way guiltless. He had known nothing of Priscilla's feeling for three years. If he had not gone to Totteridge she might have married Hilary Badoureau, might even now have been happy in forgetting himself. And he? With a shrug Stephen recognized that he did not care about himself. He did not love himself: it did not matter whether he suffered or not. What did it matter? Who was the poorer or the richer for his suffering? Suppose that he had taken Minnie Bayley away until such time as he could have

married her and domesticated their common secret. No: he could not have done that. Why not? There again Stephen struggled at a personal mystery. It was inconceivable that he should have done such a thing as long as Dorothy and Roy had been there. Yet for Priscilla he had deserted both Dorothy and Roy! And what had happened: what was to happen to them? What was to happen to Priscilla and to himself? Strange how simple actions can affect so many complex relations! It made Stephen feel that no single day, no single moment, stood apart; since all were involved in the ceaseless motion of life. He saw the progress of life as resembling the whirling motes revealed in a shaft of sunlight. On and on, round and round, went the living souls, as aimlessly as the gyrating molecules. What did it matter? A few years and the sorrow of this time would be forgotten; "men have died, and worms have eaten them; but not for love." And through all these bitter thoughts ran the fear that extreme poverty was immediately in store for them. How would that affect Priscilla? There sprang up in him at that thought a feeling of desperation. If that came, then he had indeed wholly betrayed her! He could not afford, whatever might happen, to be poor again: his pride would not bear the thought that Priscilla should suffer such humiliation. Therefore, at whatever cost, he must set his teeth and win through.

ii

One day, when there had been a little silence between them, when Stephen was sitting at breakfast for a moment after finishing his coffee, Priscilla impulsively spoke to him upon this subject.

"I've been wondering," she said, "whether . . . Stephen, I hope you're not having to worry about money. I wish you'd tell me. I know what the stopping of the

paper must mean; but you haven't said anything. And somehow I haven't had the courage to ask you. I'm all in the dark."

Stephen gave her a reflective glance; but his face did not lighten.

"There's nothing to tell," he slowly answered. "I'm trying to make good what's been lost. It's not altogether easy; but I expect it'll be all right, you know. We always knew there was an element of precariousness. I don't think I ever hid that. . . ."

Priscilla smiled, not very brightly, and hesitated before she spoke again, striving for lightness of tone.

"You always proclaimed it," she said. "I used to think you protested too much; though I know you were thinking of me. This is all I mean, dear. When I'm alone I wonder to myself whether I'm not simply . . ." Her voice faltered. For a moment she could not proceed. Then, startlingly, and in a choking voice, she said: "You see, we're both involved. It makes me unhappy to think that you may be trying to bear the whole burden. It's too hard that you should. . . . There's no need for that."

Stephen's mouth was ugly with his shame and his uncontrollable defiance. In such conflict his reply was harsh.

"Well, I don't know what you want. I can't come to you now and worry you about myself, because I feel that I haven't your confidence. But you seem to maintain an interest—a sort of pity—that I really find unbearable. Really unbearable." This time it was Stephen's voice that slightly trembled. To him it was like fighting in the dark. "If you want to know about the money business I can tell you exactly; but it doesn't seem worth while. It would only make me abject before you. It's too much to ask of me—at this time. You know I'm doing badly. Well, that's still going on. It's bound to

go on. It's in the nature of things. Bit by bit I seem to be losing all I had. But we're a long way off starvation yet; and if it weren't for our other wretchedness I should still be perfectly cheerful and expectant. With you behind me I'm not afraid of anything. But you're not there. . . ."

"I *am there.*"

"Not your heart."

"Yes," persisted Priscilla. "My heart. I'm wholly with you. You've no right to say anything else." He could see her hands trembling as she folded her napkin, and her lovely face ashen, so strong was her emotion.

"What's between us then?" he urged. "Not only the thought of Minnie. I know it's more than that. Something. . . . Feeling. Somehow I've lost your confidence . . . your love. You're only giving me something else—your loyalty. You know I recognize that, and your kindness. But what's the good of it in this case? The whole thing—the *real* thing—is wanting."

"Are you accusing me?" she asked unsteadily.

"A little," Stephen admitted. "A little." He moved restlessly. "I feel in the wrong. I admit that. I couldn't deny it. I haven't denied it. And I'm not accusing you of what you can't help. All I say is, that you're trying to force yourself to . . . what is it? Is it to compromise? I hope that's not so. Because of course that would be the worst possible thing. If you don't trust me I think you ought at least to go the whole way. Not be afraid, and fall back into a half-truth, which is what you're doing."

"It's not as simple as that, Stephen," cried Priscilla. "I must get up. I can't keep still. You know that nothing we can say really matters now. I can't help behaving strangely. I try not to. I try to show you that you've got as much as I can give."

"That's just what is the trouble," he broke out, also rising. "Dear, I'm not accusing you now. I know just how much effort you're making; but it makes me so miserable to see you *forcing* yourself. . . . If you really were cruel to me I think I could bear it better. But you see when you're kind . . . with a constraint . . . I know so clearly that there's all the difference in the world between that and your old feeling. And what makes it so ugly is that I haven't changed—I mean, that what I am now I was before. I love you just as deeply. I know you can't help it, that you're feeling outraged, that you've got reason to think much evil of me. But that doesn't make it, for me, any more tolerable. Because I'm all the time wishing everything unsaid—not to save myself—you know that—but to spare you. That's priggish; but it's quite true."

"I know it is," said Priscilla swiftly. "You can't tell me what I've not told myself. Oh, if *thought* did any good, I could have thought everything through by now. It doesn't do any good. Nor does talking. I simply feel that I *can't* be as I was before. It's not that I'm shocked. It's something wholly different. All I *do* blame you for is for not telling me long ago. That's absolutely the only thing, Stephen. Apart from that I don't feel anything against you. And even there I'm beginning to feel only sorry. I know how you're suffering. . . . What I've been trying to do is somehow to accept the thing . . . the state of affairs, and to—not pretend, but really to *be* as much your old Priscilla as I can. There's everything except my own——"

"Your own love," Stephen said. "Yes: I see it clearly. Do you wish we'd never been married?"

"No!"

Stephen turned away, unable to hide his relief at her declaration.

"Then for God's sake, my dear, don't try to be kind

to me. I don't want your kindness. I want something quite different. What you offer me is ever so much worse than cruelty."

"Stephen, I *don't* think you understand. . . ." She stopped herself. Irene had come into the room to clear away the breakfast things. Stephen looked at her with distaste; but he bowed to the law of the morning's work. Well, that moment was gone; and they had talked quite openly, face to face. He was no unhappier, at any rate, and Priscilla would certainly feel better for expressing herself and clearly saying what had been much in her mind. He would go now, and perhaps he could work. But she checked him. She could not let him go thus, although she could hardly speak steadily, and wanted only to cover her trembling lips so as to regain some of her self-control.

"Are you beginning that book for David, Stephen?"

Stephen looked back at her with doubt.

"I've done nothing at all with it," he said. "It means a lot of work, and very little return. Books don't pay. It would take me six months at least. And I thought you weren't keen on it."

"I?" She coloured deeply. "I want you to do it."

Irene was clambering round the table, her ears pricked, her naïve red face and astonished grey eyes making her seem, to their heightened fancies, a perfect living sponge for the absorption of all speeches. Fortunately she dropped a cup, and this so discomposed her, although the cup did not break, that she became too excited for any words to remain intelligible to her listening ear. When she had removed the tray, Priscilla hastened to speak again.

"I've been ashamed ever since that night," she said. "I was disgusting. I was so miserable and so irritable that I had an impulse to hurt you. I want you to write

the book. But, Stephen, you'll have to try to believe in my wish to be . . . just as I was . . . dear!"

Stephen shook his head. His eyes were quite dead.

"No," he murmured, very low. "What I prized isn't there. And what you prized is gone. It's pretty beastly, isn't it? . . . It makes me feel such an awful cad. . . ."

Without any more speech he went out of the room and of the house, and she saw him no more until the evening.

iii

And when evening came, Skeffington looked in to dinner.

"It's pretty fair impudence," he admitted. "But then I *am* impudent. It's the way I've got on. I shall introduce you to my tailor, Moore: and get a commission from him. I shall get you to insure your furniture with me. Must turn an honest penny somehow. By the way, how's my old friend the watcher by the threshold? Seen him lately? Your cat . . . I forget his name. . . . He's becoming a friend of mine; he was in sniffing my roses yesterday, and he's taken a fancy to my writing-table. Walks over my manuscript and leaves his muddy footprints there. Charming fellow! But you mustn't think I'm complaining; because I shouldn't dream of such a thing."

Skeffington stroked his little sandy beard, and his bright elusive glance travelled from one to the other in an inquiry that was far from inquisitiveness. Stephen caught the flicker of Skeffington's feminine hand.

"It's a compliment to you, Mr. Skeffington," Priscilla said. "Romeo's not at all a familiar person."

"I quite realize it. I was really boasting. I'm a boastful fellow."

"You always seem to be giving yourself away, don't you?"

"Sheer morbidness, you know. I'm so afraid of being taken seriously that I go to the opposite extreme. I become tedious. Tediousness, vanity, self-exposition. . . . By the way, how's your brother? I saw him one day recently. He was full of a scheme for Moore. I was to work Moore up to the scratch. Moore, I hereby work you up to the scratch. Some book. . . . He's very indignant about some dull scheme of your own. . . ."

"It's remarkable!" Stephen exclaimed uneasily. "Why *shouldn't* I write those pedestrian articles? Everybody's against them."

"Because they're *dull.* That's what's the matter with them. Any fool with a paste-pot and long legs could write pedestrian articles. Help me, Mrs. Moore!"

"I'm afraid," said Priscilla, with one of her old quick glances at Stephen. "I don't think you're going the right way to work."

"Ought I to condemn the scheme? Is he obstinate?"

"Yes, I am," admitted Stephen. "And I'm set on pedestrianism."

"It's not modesty, you know," Skeffington explained to Priscilla. "It's pride. He thinks he can't draw back. That's the man he is. D'you see it? The trouble with Moore is a kind of obtuse pride. Take it away, purge him of it, and he'd be a very decent fellow. But pride's a devil."

Priscilla nodded—gravely. Stephen saw her nod.

"I'm tired of being talked about," he said. "Let's try something else. Are you working yourself, Skeffington? Or doing nothing?"

"I never work. I'm lazy. I do all my work in a flurry, at the last minute, to keep a contract date. And get blamed for too much dignity of manner. Pity me!"

"Intolerably affected ass!" thought Stephen. He did not say it; but the blackness of his expression sent Skeffington into a great roar of laughter.

"Simple fellow!" he said at last. Then he devoted himself to Priscilla, leaving Stephen, ruffled, to eat his dinner in silence.

iv

But what Skeffington had said about his pride remained in Stephen's mind. Was he so proud? Was he too exacting? If he was exacting, then so was Priscilla, for at this time surely, thought he, she was being quite too extraordinarily exacting, so that she left him no single refuge of self-complacency. As he listened to their talk Stephen's grim expression relaxed: he even joined in it, for Skeffington's gaiety was wholly infectious. He carried off the poverty of his jokes with a kind of high spirits that was quite three-quarters nervous. Skeffington's physique was slight, his general air one of extreme delicacy. Stephen found himself becoming as indulgent to this new friend as he had become to David Evandine. There was about Skeffington none of the lackadaisical calm that marked David's slow, provoking survey of all the intricacies of the moment. He was all the time shining and changing and laughing, restless and vivacious. Stephen envied his vivacity: it made a charm which he himself did not possess. But he had a better brain than Skeffington, who was an artist, and not a critic at all, except of persons, in whom by nature he was abnormally interested.

Skeffington had been, it transpired, on the previous Sunday to Totteridge. He had met Mr. and Mrs. Evandine for the first time, and had been fascinated by them.

"By the way," he said, looking back at Stephen, and then again swiftly at Priscilla, "our good friend Badoureau was there."

"Really!" Priscilla spoke. "That's strange. I thought he was going away."

"Apparently not."

"See, weren't *we* going to Totteridge last Sunday?" asked Stephen. "We didn't go."

"I *thought* Master Badoureau—" began Skeffington, and checked himself suddenly. "He only stayed a little while. What a jolly little car he's got!" He seemed to be smiling elfishly, as though a whimsical idea had struck him. "Now, of course," said he, "that most delightful child who's staying there must be your sister, Moore."

"Isn't she lovely?" exclaimed Priscilla. "I'm very glad you saw her."

"I hope you'll ask me to tea when she comes to see you," artfully hinted Skeffington.

"She was very impressed with your singing the last time she was here," demurely remarked Priscilla. That considerably dashed him, for he sang in a very loud voice.

"I'm so sorry. I was probably doing my fireplace. It's such a help to sing as you rake the cinders. Or perhaps I was baking. . . ." He was trying to overcome their bad impression by insidious detail.

"I'm sorry to say you were beating time with something, Mr. Skeffington," said Priscilla. "I don't think you can have been doing any really useful work."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps not. Anyway, I hope you won't forget. . . ."

Stephen had by now quite recovered his spirits; but the talk about Dorothy recalled to his mind the fact that her immediate future was a matter for concern. He fell into a brown study; and was glad when Skeffington, after a good deal of further desultory nonsense, withdrew. He was then alone with Priscilla. She took his arm as he returned from the front door.

"I like Mr. Skeffington," she said.

"I can't help liking him too," remarked Stephen.

"Why shouldn't you?" she demanded.

"Did Badoureau think *we* were going to Totteridge?"

Priscilla flinched ever so slightly. She answered quite frankly.

"He may have done so. I don't remember telling him." There was a moment's silence. Then she continued. "He's a very old friend of David's, of course."

They did not speak again of Hilary; but went on talking about the book Stephen was to write, which perhaps was to be successful and make a man's reputation. . . .

CHAPTER XIX: TOLERANCE

i

ALL this time the old man had given no sign. He had not written; there had been no indication whatever, beyond his silence, that he had received Stephen's letter. He was as one dead. Nor had Roy repeated his visit to Hampstead. The old home in Slapperton Street kept its own secret. At Totteridge Dorothy's plan for the re-exploitation of her personality was in abeyance. Mr. and Mrs. Evandine were also outside the immediate range of Stephen's knowledge. Every other thing, besides his own difficulties and the secret trouble of Priscilla, was in a lull. At times he could not help feeling that this seeming lull was a prelude to some larger and more grievous series of complications. Of all those who formed his personal circle David and Hilary alone were active—the one because his imperturbable and inscrutable behaviour always hid a ceaseless interior movement of the mind, the other because he had apparently much leisure and a natural bias towards the social life of Hampstead. Priscilla saw nobody in those days: she was alone. Equally alone was Stephen. The slow evolution of personal interactions, on the surface so little changing, but at bottom so constantly disintegrating and re-forming in new arrays, was for both of them at a standstill. It was as though their little world, before this vital difference, stood aside in contemplation. But, when a fortnight had gone by, the movements which had appeared suspended became once more clearly to be seen, and they had in that interval so definitely progressed as to show that the air of stillness had been deceptive. From that one moment all the conflicting impulses and desires

crossed and became again entangled. From then all the interests of those people with whom Stephen's life was associated began directly to react upon him and upon his relation to Priscilla, until that time when, for a period, the immediate end of all this business seemed to be reached. In after life he was able to detect—not the reason, but at least the moment of the turn in his affairs which from now carried him forward upon the crest of a wave, and brought him to the crisis of his passionate adventure. So it was that his present feeling of strange expectation was justified, since the lull, although it had no real existence, but was merely a result of his own momentary weariness, did most certainly leave Stephen at the mercy of untoward events.

ii

The first indication of the new movement came in a curious way. It came as it were casually, when, one evening, Dorothy appeared at their front door with David as escort, both of them suspiciously breathless and talkative. They came into the sitting-room, where Priscilla was reading a novel and where Stephen was frowning over the compression into five hundred words of a review which in eight hundred words was already packed as tightly as he could for the moment pack it. Priscilla's first reflection, after her quick impulse of pleasure, was "they've quarrelled"; her second "she's refused him"; her third "she hasn't let him speak"; her fourth "whatever is the matter?" She could tell that both were very excited, and that neither of them looked at the other, or directly at anybody else. Only, they talked. . . . She looked at Stephen, to find him apparently puzzled by Dorothy's behaviour. Were they in love with one another? Priscilla could not be sure. David never spoke seriously of himself: she thought him secretive.

Dorothy, unlike some girls, never talked about her feelings, although she did not seem to put any check upon her tongue. So they sat there, laughing and talking, Dorothy quick and merry, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed, so that she looked like the embodiment of mischief; Priscilla graver, still rather pale and exquisitely fair; Stephen with an air of affection overriding his natural seriousness; and David's very thin but very alert brown face alive with expression while his eyes brimmed with an intriguing and mysterious kind of drunkenness. The visitors gave no hint as to their own relations: they simply said, "We've come to see you." And there they were, talking like children, and saying a great deal of nonsense which nobody (not even themselves) could understand.

They had come, it appeared, by tramcar from Whetstone to Golders Green; and had walked the rest of the way. It was such a beautiful night, they said; with so many stars; and there was such a bonny moon; and the tram conductor had dropped David's shilling, and matches innumerable had been required for its recovery; and the tram had nearly run away with them, through the driver's sudden loss of nerve; and in fact their recital was as commonplace as anybody could suppose. What, then, had given them this great air of marvellous buoyancy? At their age, Priscilla supposed, only one thing; and then she chid herself for being so stupid. Why shouldn't they be amused at their adventures? She hoped they were not flirting! A dread of it ran across her mind. Did she know of Dorothy that she would not behave in such a way? A glance reassured her. She smiled and shook her head once, in a sort of bewilderment; but somehow they amused her very much. They made her feel so old—so married. It occurred to her to think how pleasant it would be, when they had gone, to talk to Stephen about her questions. So she could still

talk to him? Of course she could! Priscilla knew that the only topic upon which they could not speak at ease was the topic of their own relation. It made her sigh to think of it; but she did not therefore lose her sense of quick, amused sympathy for the happy children whose mysterious behaviour was proving so engrossing a problem for her wits.

iii

"Biddy's going to be married!" announced Dorothy in a startling pause.

"No!" Priscilla was surprised out of her benign sense of elderliness. "How awfully interesting!"

"A man in Totteridge. Mrs. Evandine knew nothing about it. He's a very rich man—a builder."

"Builders are very bad men as a rule," observed David languidly.

"This one's nice. I've seen him. But Biddy deserves somebody nicer, I'm sure. I feel terribly flattered, because she told me herself. She said, very kindly, 'I'm going to be married, miss. He's a builder . . . a very respectable man. He employs five men.' It *does* sound rather good. . . . But I feel it's a drop for Biddy."

"Dorothy thinks she deserves a Marquis," David teased. Priscilla smiled at a recollection.

"I remember you always admired Biddy," she admitted. "She impressed you."

"I feel she's so much better bred than I am. Except when she talks naturally. Do you notice how servants have two manners? When they're being 'servants' they're so very prim and silent and rustling . . . and when they're human beings they talk differently and move differently; and make a noise and laugh. I never thought Biddy could laugh; and then one day I heard

her roaring away when she didn't know I was there. She's two persons."

"A double-face," suggested David, leaning back in his chair and smiling.

"Oh no, David," Priscilla interposed. "She's a splendid girl. What will mother do without her?"

Dorothy crossed the room to Stephen, and sat beside him.

"Have you done anything about me?" she asked.

"I've got some particulars. You shall have them presently—before you go."

"Is it very expensive?" They were speaking about her cookery lessons. "Talking about Biddy reminded me. She wants to learn cookery too. In two months! She'll have to cook her builder's meals."

Priscilla was listening. She looked sharply at the unreadably smiling David.

"Mr. Skeffington's got some diploma as a cook," she said. "We're going in one night to a dinner prepared entirely by himself. But, Dorothy, you surely haven't anything to learn?"

"Only method." The words came abruptly from Stephen. "And she'd get a necessary certificate."

"Beautiful things!" murmured Dorothy in a sort of trance. "Beautiful things to melt in your mouth. Terribly expensive things for old gentlemen to eat at banquets."

"Oh, but they have *chefs!*" objected David.

"Now, they do!" Dorothy was fiery in retort. "Wait! Years hence women will do it all, and the dinners will be over early. I shall practise on David. I shall bring him back things with a thousand ingredients. And he shall eat them before my very eyes!"

David groaned. His complacent expression changed to one of utter helplessness.

"I don't know which to pity most—among these cooks.

You, who dine with old Skeff; or Biddy's builder; or myself. But after all, you may escape the first onset, while the builder and I . . ."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," persisted Dorothy, with the reflective enthusiasm of the Mikado when he discusses the merits of boiling oil and molten lead, "for Biddy also to practise on David. He could be a kind of unofficial judge, deciding between us."

"How terrible all this talk is!" cried David, for whom it had very real terrors. "Parlons d'autres choses! as Madame de Sevigné says."

"I was only joking. . . . For one thing, I shan't be at Totteridge," Dorothy said in a peculiar tone. David looked straight at her.

"No. I'd forgotten that." It was impossible to detect any feeling in David's acknowledgment.

Priscilla almost stamped in her interest and her bewilderment. She could not . . . she really had no wish to be curious; but if she might not be curious about Dorothy and David then her range of interests must be painfully circumscribed. And so she was forced to admit privately to herself that she was frightfully curious.

"You'll be here," added Stephen, with Priscilla a kind of half-beat late.

"Though I don't know why you shouldn't be at Totteridge," was Priscilla's murmured supplement. She and Dorothy exchanged a mutually imploring look. "Has father ever finished his essay on gardens? He was writing it . . . while we were away. . . ." In spite of her momentary preoccupation with other things Priscilla faltered in saying that, and was almost manifestly in distress.

"Poor old man. Poor old Minch. Poor everybody!" David shed commiseration with a regal bounty. "Only execration for Vanamure."

"Well, I feel sorry for him!" cried Dorothy.

"Do tell us what's happened!"

"Well, father's hair is bleached; Minch is bent double, and crawleth upon all-fours; and Vanamure purrs over the whole farrago of nonsense. He's as ignorant as a hen. I said to father: 'It won't do.' I *had* to say it, to protect him!"

"Poor old chap!" They all three shook wiseacre heads, Stephen alone thoughtfully considering the unwisdom of Mr. Evandine from a technical point of view. To Stephen the idea of writing about something one had made no profound effort to understand was as condemnable as the adulteration of food-stuffs.

"Why did he do it?" was the question at last produced from his gloomy thoughts; and as the subject was by then fading gradually from their attention all laughed at his concern.

"It might be vanity—or innocence—or the lures of that serpent Vanamure," suggested David.

"Why does your father have anything to do with Vanamure?"

David looked smilingly at Priscilla. It was a leading question. It raised vast issues.

"Well, Stephen," he said candidly, "the obvious answer, and the true one, you wouldn't understand. You're not old enough. And it's not in your Protestant-moral character to appreciate it. And Priscilla wouldn't like me to tell you. But the truth is, he's rather disposed to bask in the sunny warmth of Vanamure."

"I'm sorry," said Stephen. Priscilla showed her disgust by going out of the room with Dorothy.

iv

As the door closed quietly but decidedly behind the two girls, David resumed his explanation.

"Richard le Gallienne once wrote an article called 'The

Desire of the Candle for the Moth.' It's a very interesting thing to observe at what point men feel the need of inferiors. It's no doubt when they've reached the end of their intellectual enterprise—when they're not able to learn any more. A remarkable field for the student of intellectual pathology."

"Do you mean there's a sudden fall in their sense of values?" asked Stephen, interested.

"Oh, there are always fluctuations, aren't there? But while a middle-aged man wants a cordial atmosphere of sympathy a young man always wants to know men who stimulate his curiosity."

"That's not universal," warned Stephen. "Only some, remarkable, young men."

"Of course I'm assuming some calibre. I think the old boy's got that—or had it. He's a very candid chap. But men of his own type get stuck in one place, as he's done; and they never meet, except at the Literary Fund dinner, or a banquet to some second-rate foreign person; so they're all living on memory and old association. They tend inevitably to collect satellites."

Such talk made Stephen more and more gloomy.

"If that's so, it's very bad," he observed with great rectitude. David shrugged.

"Is it?" he asked. "Do you suppose a man's always to go out trailing clouds of glory. It's not the modern literary life, my lad."

"I *couldn't* bear it!" cried Stephen, with a magnificent egoism. "It's so humiliating. To have adherents and admirers. It's loathly."

"What do you want then? Don't you want people to accept your ideas, your estimates? To rally round you? Don't you imagine it would be rather fine to be recognized and admired?"

"Not at all. No. I've never thought of it. I should hate it."

"What then?"

"I don't know. I want people to think right for the right reasons—not because I say a thing, or because they like me."

"That's like Priscilla's virtue for virtue's sake. You can see it's all right for her, because she's happy; but, my dear chap, *think* how inhuman it is!"

Stephen sighed, and shook his head.

"Is it? Then what is one to do? I should like above all things to know wise people—people who would be so amazingly instructed in all varieties of truth that the whole of life was mapped before them. There aren't such men. I don't know any who aren't working somehow to some mysterious white spot in the future—some luminous spark that they couldn't describe. But a journey done, a falling-back on lesser aims, I simply can't understand. Why can't men go on pegging away all their lives, sustained by that one unrealizable notion of the white spot?"

"Because they're human beings. That's the only answer." David seemed rather ruffled. He lighted a cigarette, not as though with any deliberate intention, but as if the action were thoughtless. "I mean, you can't expect human vitality to go beyond a certain point of endurance. There's a strain-point—even a breaking-point. Take something apart from intellect. Take some normal affair. Marriage, for instance."

"You think that's a compromise?"

"I think it entails compromise. Call it adjustment. It's not necessarily compromise in the sense of any sacrifice of principle. Losses, gains; it's comparable with your relation to society: you don't go about screaming or naked."

"I don't want to."

"But you wouldn't like anybody else to do it. It would interfere with you. You couldn't bear to have

your liberty curtailed by some outrageous eccentric. That's what society does for you. Society says, such things, though pleasing to the maniac, are displeasing to the majority. Either the maniac goes of his own free will to some colony of like persons, or, if he stays with us, he recognizes our sentiments and conforms to our practices. So they either shut him up or ostracize him."

"Ha," grumbled Stephen. "I wouldn't."

"But, my dear chap, that's nonsense! Directly he did it in your house you'd say, 'I can't stand that. I can't work. He must *go!*' Now, wouldn't you?" David laughed at his own mimicry.

"You're getting off the point," advised Stephen, outdebated by a red herring. "When I say 'no compromise' I expect I'm being unsophisticated—or is it sophisticated? Don't you recognize the power of rectitude at all? I mean, not a mere priggishness, but a love of doing right—not that good may follow, but that the right thing is the thing that most attracts you. You don't, surely, take refuge in a mere cynicism?"

"Well, at what point does tolerance become cynicism?"

"I should say, at the point where it loses sight of one's own ideal. When all ideals are equally indifferent. Good gracious, David, tolerance is only a *word*. It's never a fact. Who's tolerant?"

"You are, on the whole."

"Never. I savagely detest . . ."

"Priscilla . . . my mother . . . Dorothy. Even I myself. . . ."

Stephen was silent for a moment. When he spoke again he was very quiet.

"You're not," he said. "Dorothy's not."

"Then we're a pair. I say, she's going to marry me."

"I thought so. I'm very glad indeed. Your mother

certainly is very good. She's splendid. . . . But as for Priscilla . . ."

The girls came breathlessly back into the room.

"You're in time," David just mentioned.

"I heard my name."

"It's a question of your tolerance," explained David. Priscilla started, and seemed as though she were transfixed. Dorothy, with a flushed face and slightly trembling lips, looked for one instant with a bold pride across the room to David. Stephen looked neither up nor down; but he hesitated a little.

"Priscilla isn't tolerant," he said. "She's generous; but she isn't tolerant. She feels too intensely to be tolerant. She can't trust her judgment."

The lovers, obsessed by their own thrilling happiness, heard nothing. Stephen might just as well not have spoken, for all the attention they paid to his words. They mechanically made ready to depart. Only Priscilla heard.

CHAPTER XX: ROY IN TROUBLE

i

ONE morning there came a letter from the old man. Priscilla saw the shiny cheap envelope lying upon the mat, and by instinct lifted it up by a single corner. It was not a clean envelope; the edges were slightly yellowed as with age or preservation; and the old man's flowing, half-tremulous, unmistakable handwriting was revealed. Still holding the envelope by the corner Priscilla went back into the room where Stephen was eating his simple breakfast. She did not want to give him the letter: it was hateful to her: yet she knew that he must see it and must read it. Across her mind flashed the thought that there was now nothing in the world that the old man could write which Stephen could wish her not to know. That impulsive thought deepened. She felt that the letter had perhaps some significance, that as the old man had been the occasion of the partial estrangement of which she and Stephen alike were heartily tired, so he might possibly have something to say which would make their future relation easier.

With a sinking heart she handed the envelope to Stephen, and he, with an expression of almost equal trouble, opened it. Priscilla quietly resumed her seat and pretended to take no notice of the letter. Then, with a gesture that made her heart seem for an instant to stop beating, Stephen handed it across the table. Their eyes met. With a rising colour Priscilla turned to the letter, conscious as she did so of a curious shudder at contact with paper so subtly unclean.

"My dear Stephen," said the old man,—"I write in the utmost haste and with all conceivable rapidity to apprise you of events of the gravest moment which are

at this time befalling the remainder and I regret to say the apparently to you neglible remainder of your family. Not for myself do I upon this occasion plead with you for assistance. Far from that. It is for him alone—in danger, through his too considerate heart, beset upon every hand by spies, a pardonable weakness, and in fact the danger of irremediable disgrace. Were I able to rise from my bed I would even old as I am, even ignored and worthless as I am, come to you upon my knees to save this unfortunate, this misguided and stricken boy from the dire and dreadful consequences of his rash act. Come, Stephen, I implore you, without delay; for as I have explained a few moments may make all the difference. Come, if you would relieve the paternal heart, stricken but indomitable, at this last, this painful and resounding backhanded blow from the hand of Fate. Your father, J. M."

Even in the midst of her growing bewilderment Priscilla observed that Stephen was hurrying to finish his breakfast. She read again the puzzling words, and found in them no enlightenment.

"Surely he's left something out," she murmured at last.

"Roy's evidently in trouble. . . . He's excited, and he's forgotten that I don't know what it is that's happened. Tautologists always leave out the essential thing. I shall go down there at once."

"To Slapperton Street?"

"It looks as though there's been some accident," Stephen said, putting his cup hastily down. "Or Roy's done something, or been accused of doing something." He spoke with a sort of miserable grimness. "I dare say the old man's at the bottom of it."

"He's ill, Stephen . . . the old man." Priscilla's quick sympathy rose in defence of the weak.

"Ill!" Stephen's inflexion was a significant one. "The

old man always takes to his bed when anything uncomfortable happens. I'm not simply speaking cruelly: it's a fact. But I must go at once. That poor kid may be in a thorough fix. By the way, if Dorothy comes, don't mention it. She'd be alarmed, and probably go rushing down there."

He was gone, leaving the letter still upon the table in front of Priscilla.

ii

The morning was cloudy, and there had already been some rain, which was drying away from the centres of the paving-stones. The atmosphere was both hot and moist, so that Stephen felt the perspiration upon his face as he hurried to the Tube railway station. He was in that mood when everything seems to be an obstruction or a cause of delay; and he suffered accordingly from a crowd at the ticket office; a dilatory liftman; a slow and jerky journey to the centre of the earth; a missed train; and presently from the inpouring of huge numbers of girls and women on their way to offices in the City or the West End. He was alarmed at the hint contained in the old man's letter, and irritated at the manner in which the hint had been conveyed. But he also tormented himself with the thought that if he had been standing by Roy as he ought to have done any trouble such as the one he feared would have been averted. Why was it that he had done nothing? To plead that he was busy, or worried, or careless, was not in his nature: he could not offer any excuse; he could only arraign himself and the old man. This, in both cases, he did very heartily.

So the journey passed, until he reached Euston and turned eastwards by omnibus, growing each moment more convinced of his own shortcoming and that of the old man. It never occurred to him to blame Roy. Roy,

he felt, was a sort of joint product of the old man and himself. He had never had a chance, owing to the rivalry between his elders. Very well. If Roy was in a scrape, as it seemed, the time had come to take a firm line and to insist that henceforward Roy should live under Priscilla's eye. For himself Stephen thought nothing: his responsibility was an accepted thing. What was also clear was that the old man must be finally dealt with on this point also. The old man, like a bad husbandman, must be punished by the withdrawal of his fallow lands. Roy must be taken away from him. Angrily, coldly, grimly, Stephen decided that upon his journey. The determination expelled everything else from his thoughts. The time had come. The old man's hour had struck. Therein Stephen thought truer than he knew.

iii

In the watery sunlight of this morning, while the sun was burning away the mists which had arisen from the summer rain, and was preparing an oppressive, windless midday, Pentonville Road and Upper Street were alike vile to the human eye. Dirt seemed ingrained in the shabby buildings; the hurrying people and the noisy vehicles, so crowded upon the roadway, deepened Stephen's sense of dismay. Carts loaded with boxes and bales and cases trundled before the vehemently gonging electric tramcars; red huge swaying motor-omnibuses lurched and roared among the traffic; the air was full of grinding din. At "The Angel," a public-house which gives its name to the point of junction of about seven busy and traffic-laden thoroughfares, there was a notable congestion of vehicles. Upon this spot were discharged the grimy affairs of Pentonville Road and Saint John Street Road, of City Road and Goswell Road, of Essex Road and Upper Street and Liverpool Road. Wherever he looked Stephen saw the buildings

which had been familiar to him all his life. Down there to the right as he reached the top of Pentonville Road was Rosebery Avenue, the "opening" of which by the earl after whom it had been named he remembered witnessing as a boy: before him was a music-hall in which, when it was the Grand Theatre, he had taken Dorothy to see their first pantomime. As he hurried along the Upper Street he came to the Agricultural Hall, familiar to him as the home of innumerable tournaments and exhibitions and cycle-shows, with a smaller hall behind it where he had sometimes watched the ancient Mohawk Minstrels. He could remember hearing them sing "Clementine" and a hundred other songs of an immemorial character on very rare evenings when he had been able to indulge himself with what he called "an extravagance." There, too, was Collins's Music Hall, which he had never entered; and upon his left lay all this long hideous boring succession of stale shops, now so reduced in the world. He could remember walking stolidly along this wide pavement looking into those windows at the waxen little boys who displayed stiffly and with an altogether inhuman passivity the uncomfortable virtues of some suit of clothes beyond the means of their observer, who went for years in shabby clothes that he kept whole only by assiduous and strictly private repairs of his own. Every inch of the way made him suffer once more the old feeling of being crushed, the defiant hatred of poverty, the bitter dread of the triumph of unkindness. To him as he walked, thinking not of himself but of Roy, it seemed that any misdemeanour might be forgiven a rebellious dweller among such overwhelming dreariness. He did not once think of himself: he was absorbed in recollection of old sensations, reimagining the past with such vividness that he lived it through again. And he thought with comprehension of Roy, weak, untrained, without guidance, under the

influence of the old man and the old man only. Bitterly then did he again accuse himself.

iv

So he came to the familiar turning wherein lay that tall house among its many fellows, distinguished from them only by the number upon the door, which, according to Dorothy's rueful irony, had served merely as a warning to the postman—like the leper's bell. Here Stephen had to knock, to receive the familiar odours of the basement, to mount the stairs. . . . In the sitting-room little was changed: only the place was untidy and dirty. Well, who was to blame for that? Blame . . . blame . . . blame . . . the thought ran in Stephen's mind. If one blamed one could only bring the accusation finally against oneself. Dorothy would have blamed the old man. Stephen, with a morbid sense of responsibility, felt the fault to be his own. In the next room he found Roy, very white, newly shaved and very carefully dressed, standing listlessly by the window. At Stephen's entrance Roy started, turned quickly, and to Stephen's horror, flinched before him, as though his impulse had been to escape.

"Hallo, Roy: where's the old man?"

Roy could not speak. He swallowed once or twice, and his lips moved: then he darted forward and caught at Stephen's hand. Gaspingly he said:

"I've come a mucker, Steve. I've come a mucker. . . ."

No recollection of the phrase reminded Stephen of his own moment of despair at the stoppage of *The Norm*. The word, ugly as it was, was too much a part of their ancient, and upon his side discarded, vocabulary to arrest his attention; but he was quick to respond reassuringly, for such an appeal instantly produced all the kindness of his nature.

"We'll get you out of it, old chap. So long as you

let me know the whole of it. Tell me." Stephen's eye had a new light at the sense of Roy's willingness to confide in him. To find Roy with his naturally stubborn vanity in abeyance was to be enabled to meet the real difficulty with his hands free. A sullen Roy, from whom the details must laboriously be obtained, would have made long and dexterous negotiation with his vanity the first wearisome preliminary to any kind of remedial step; but this wholly candid boyish turn of readiness was the way to a rapid solution. "What's it all about? A quarrel, or something more troublesome?"

There was a dead stoppage. Roy turned away to the window. Then, as if with an effort, he faced round again. Stephen's keen watchfulness and keener judgment were busy, guessing, observing, calculating.

"It's so hard to tell . . ." Roy began; and his eyes looked everywhere but at Stephen's face. His orange-tipped fingers were twisting as he stood there like a culprit before his brother. Once or twice a different feeling seemed to come over him, for he made an uncontrollable little vain grimace and shrugged his shoulders in a way horribly reminiscent to the observer of the old man. Stephen waited for quite a moment in the silence, and Roy grew a fiery red in his increasing embarrassment.

"Have a shot at it. You know I'll help you. But I can't if I don't know what it is you've been doing."

"It's so awkward . . . I feel you won't understand. . . . But it's simply hellish!" said Roy, in a voice that was unlike his own, almost complaining, but apologetic and shamefaced as well. "You wouldn't understand the temptation."

"Shouldn't I?" Stephen asked dryly. "What sort of thing?"

"Beastly. Dishonest." It was blurted out at him.

"You mean you've been taking money?" Stephen

said at length slowly, in a patient voice from which miserable certainty had taken all the hope and all the life. Somehow the knowledge did not surprise him; but it had been his worst inexpressible fear, painfully realized at the last.

There was a hesitation—another clear pause that left no doubt of Roy's answer.

"Tell me how it happened."

Huskily and in gasping sentences, each of which was followed by a perceptible break, Roy explained.

"Two months ago . . . they put me on the till. I've been putting dockets through. They found it out. Of course I swore blind I hadn't done it; but they'd found out somehow. I know all the other chaps have done it. It's always done."

"But *you*, Roy!" It was Stephen's only reproach. Roy's voice grew still lower.

"It was all right at first. I . . . But the old man's been taking my money. It's been gone out of my pockets . . . and he's asked me for odd bits of it. . . ."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Stephen cried. "I could have stopped it as easily as anything. There's no reason why he should do that. Why ever didn't you tell me?"

Roy shot a quick glance at him, with an air that was partly cunning, partly afraid, and partly altogether honest. His speech followed the truth.

"Well—after that last time at Hampstead . . . I thought I'd put my foot in it about Minnie. I thought you wouldn't want me. . . . You see, the old man said——"

"Oh, *damn* the old man!" Stephen exclaimed, jerking his hands, and walking about the room in a fierce irritation. "You *know* you oughtn't to listen to him. Damn! It's sickening! . . . However, it's no good to say that. It's too late. Is it much money?" He turned abruptly upon Roy.

Roy wavered. He couldn't bring himself to say anything, in case Stephen might fly out at him. He was genuinely afraid. He began to speak inaudibly.

"They found out and sent me home. Told me to come. . . ."

"Is it much?"

"I . . . not a lot . . . I don't know . . ." stammered Roy. "I'm to go down there. . . ."

"How much is it? How much do you *think* it is?" Stephen was inexorable. "I suppose they won't prosecute as they sent you home; but the money must somehow be paid back. I *must* know how much it is. You see that, don't you?"

He appealed suddenly to Roy, who had grown white again, and stood cowed before him.

"It's about . . . God knows how it's mounted. I haven't kept any account. I started doing it, meaning at first to put it back. . . . It's about . . . it's about fifteen pounds."

Stephen was appalled. To him, even now, it was a great sum; and he did not know how he could obtain it.

"I say, Roy, that's . . . In such a short time. What have you been doing with it? Is it betting? Something of that sort?"

Roy's head sank lower; his foot moved uneasily.

"I can't tell you what I've done with it. It's gone. The old man had some . . . a lot."

"You're trying to throw all the blame on the old man! Don't be such a coward, Roy!" Stephen spoke sharply because he saw that Roy's impulse was to exploit their natural hostility to one another. He would not permit such a blind. "You must have spent a good deal yourself. And as I've got to make it good I want to know what I'm paying for. Have you thought of it like that?"

"No."

"Don't talk about the old man then! Own up to your own share. You know what he is."

"It's God's truth, Stephen," began Roy eagerly. "He's had a lot. As much as me."

"Have you been drinking, or playing cards, or . . . what is it?"

There was a silence. Roy's face had stiffened; his mouth was twisted in an ugly expression of obstinacy, and his general cast had assumed an uncompromising stubbornness. Stephen saw that inquiries such as he had been making must tend to make other matters between them more difficult; and he desisted for the time.

"I'd better go and call on David Evandine, get him to lend me the money for a few days, and then go down with you to your office and see the manager. Roy, I hope you haven't been taking one of these squawking girls to the music-halls. . . . That's not it, is it? Cheap jewellery and chocolates? That gets rid of a lot." He thought he had probably hit upon the true explanation; but he knew that even if he were right there would be no chance of having his guess confirmed. He knew that the peculiar code of honour of young manhood prevents revelation of that sort to an elder. He sighed sharply, as Roy gave him the expected refusal.

"I can't tell you." Roy's tone was dogged. "The old man's had a lot. Really, he has."

Stephen thought quickly as to a possible course.

"One thing," he said. "You stay here no longer. You're coming home with me to-day. That's certain. But meanwhile I must borrow the money and go with you to the office."

A slow painful scraping noise, as of somebody descending stairs one by one in slack and broken slippers, reached the ears of both.

"Here's the old man!" cried Roy in quick alarm.

"He's in an awful state!" He moved behind Stephen, shielding himself.

A moment later the door opened, and the old man appeared as in a frame, bowed and with a look of elaborate misery upon his face. His hair was over his eyes, his brilliant teeth were all gone, his scraggy neck appeared above the collar of a dressing-gown which had once been gorgeous. He supported himself against the doorway.

"Ss . . . Stephen . . ." he mumbled, with a lisp. "Thank God, my boy, you've come." His voice sank to an impressive whisper. "I've had . . . I've had . . ." His head waggled. "I've had a wakeful night . . . thin . . . thinking about you. . . . Thank God, my boy. . . . . Back to your old home. . . . Eh, but it's a sight for sair eyes. . . . My brave boy Stephen!"

V

Stephen's reply to these greetings was a silent look which had the effect of making the old man come from the doorway into the room, blinking his eyelids and carrying his shoulders forward as though he were suddenly bent with age. And indeed Stephen was aware of a subtle change in him. It had not been his wont to appear thus in his dressing-gown. He had clearly grown for some reason careless of appearances, if it were not, as Stephen suspected, that he had for this occasion assumed the part of an enfeebled old creature, forlorn and piteous. His eyes had lost their bitter smiling glance of complacency and were bloodshot and weak-looking; his carriage was strangely reduced, so that his figure appeared wizened. The absence of his denture had allowed his cheeks to fall in and his lips to lose all their firmness; and his neck, which usually rose from above his very tall collar in proud support of his head, was withered and shrivelled in a hundred tiny inglorious puckers. He was

indeed old. To call him old, by a familiar method of reference, seemed to be an indecency, because it had lost its humorous sting. He was old, grey, haggard. Stephen looked at him; and the longer he looked the more impressed he was by the change in his father's appearance.

"I'm going to see Roy through his scrape," Stephen said; "and then I'm going to take him away from you."

The old man groped forward. He had become grotesque.

"Steve! . . . Don't take my boy." It was a piercing cry, almost a prayer. His attitude became imploring. "What should I do without my boy? He's my baby. You've taken little Dolphy!"

"D'you see what you've brought him to?" Stephen said slowly. "D'you see that this is your doing? It's mine, too, of course; but I'm going to set it right."

The old man drew himself upright. He drew a breath through his flaccid lips. His voice changed, and with it his entire manner. In an instant he had assumed something of his old malicious air. Once more he and Stephen were declared enemies, uncompromising in their mutual dislike and contempt.

"Yes, Stephen, that's you all over," he said in a shocking toothless way, like a beggar hag who curses the insensitive passenger. "As you've been from the very start. As hard as stone . . . as hard as stone. But with the most beautiful sentiments. *Always* . . . always the most admirable, the most *admirable* sentiments. . . . You're like a Christian, Stephen. Yes, you're like one of those damned self-righteous parsons. Singular thing, Stephen. A singular thing, I say." There came at this point an involuntary pause, during which he mouthed soundlessly in a way that chilled Stephen by its dreadful suggestion of impotence. "You take your mother, and you try to poison her mind against me; you take Dorothy and my boy there; and you try to poison their minds

against me. You take them away from me. . . . Why, you're like a magistrate, Stephen; a bawdy magistrate. That's what you're like. Taking my . . . children away from their father . . . handing them over to the Court . . . Missionary. . . . And all the time—you sly fellow —you're methodically debauching another man's wife . . . like the impeccable fellow you are. Impeccable! Immaculate! The immaculate Stephen! He he! There's virtue for you! The old man's too low, too popular, too debonair for you, Stephen. . . ." He stopped breathlessly, his anger having exhausted him; and leant up against the wall, recovering his breath. Stephen had never seen him so vehemently moved; but he was himself stung to a cold anger by his father's accusations.

"The old man would have done more to earn my respect if he'd sacrificed a little of his popularity and looked after his children better," Stephen said contemptuously. "Instead of posing his life away and letting his youngest child pilfer for him."

"It's a lie!" shouted the old man, rearing up against the wall with his arms erect. "It's a lie!" He choked for an instant, and subsided into a dreary sort of whisper. "My baby, my Roy!"

"Come along, Roy. Get your hat," said Stephen. To the old man he said in the same grim way: "I shall come and see you again. But Roy doesn't come back. D'you see?" He did not wait for an answer; but went out of the room with Roy at his heels. The old man stood where they left him, huddled in his stale dressing-gown, the wreck of a gorgeous plumage of old. And as Stephen hurried along, shaken by the scene but still bent upon his determination, he was beset by one sure piece of unhappy knowledge that made his position ten times more difficult. He knew, that is to say, that the old man was really ill; but the knowledge which most troubled him was not that, nor anything connected with it. He

knew that in spite of all histrionics, all feuds, the old man deeply and passionately loved Roy; and he was guessing that the old man's hatred for himself had its roots in jealousy. It was another lesson for him, and he had much to learn, much to re-examine.

CHAPTER XXI: STRAWS

i

FOR some time after he had made this discovery Stephen walked by Roy's side deep in thought. If the discovery proved true, it would explain much that had puzzled Stephen in the past. It would put some of his own behaviour in a new light. Was he jealous of the old man? That thought made him smile. Nevertheless it was possible. What seemed to him at the moment absolutely certain was the old man's profound—almost fanatical—jealousy. For the sake of preserving Roy he had written that excited letter; but that was simply because he could not lay his hands upon a sufficient sum of money to cover Roy's liability. Stephen, apparently, was his sole resource.

They went by the underground electric railway to Covent Garden, where, in the heart of publishers, where there is as much that is amusing to be seen as there is anywhere else in the world, David lived his airy life of secrecy and knowledge. Directly the Moores entered the building a remarkably tall youth who was called Orry by his fellow-workers (because Horace was not his Christian name) appeared from behind a glass erection and with long, superhuman strides which left them like panting Time toiling with admiration in his rear led them down an endless, book-bordered aisle to a dark room where they languished for some moments. It was like penetrating to the depths of a mountain. The room seemed to be brilliantly lighted by electricity, but its area was so small and its general appearance so circumscribed that it gave them the impression of being in a cavern, because it enjoyed no natural light and no fresh air of any descrip-

tion. Huge trolleys were allowed to run up and down the aisle on rubber-tyred wheels, and every now and then a pile of books, propelled by some unseen hand, would fall with a crash near the door of the room. The noises were so sudden, and so much in contrast with the solemn quietude of the office, that involuntarily Stephen and Roy jumped at each discharge. From behind another door came the tic-tac-tacking of a typewriter. The noise pierced their brains like the dreadful peppering of a hidden machine-gun. They shared a sense of being appalled. The room was a highway. Hundreds of persons poured through it, until it seemed like the scene of a farcical cinema film. Roy's brain whirled. It was a revelation to him—this strange mixture of ease and velocity.

And then came a knock, and Horace appeared once more, this time to lead them into David's enormous blue, bluely furnished, barely adorned private room, where he lived in seclusion like a choice blue spider. David was putting tobacco from a jar into a pouch with one hand while with the other he held a telephone receiver. Roy stared round the room with awe. Its blueness and its comfort alike struck him with wonder. Although he was accustomed to offices this one was run on lines that were new to him. As he was rather quick in thought this surprise went so far as to suggest to him that David's office, whether it was typical of publishers' offices in general or whether it stood as a single unsurpassable example of the trade, was run on no lines at all; but that was only a momentary notion, dispelled by a glance at David.

"Yes," David was saying into the telephone receiver, nodding his head as though his hearer could be aware of his action. "Well, you tell him he's jolly well *got* to deliver it on the 30th. I've got to get something for my travellers to show. . . . He mustn't fail!" To Stephen,

as he rang off, he said, with a grin, "These damned authors! They don't understand they're only our employees."

Stephen then demanded fifteen pounds.

ii

From that office they went east, and Roy became paler. He had been gradually getting more and more disinclined to face his own employers; and if Stephen had not been there he very likely would not have gone, but would have disappeared for a time until he could get some other situation. But as Stephen was there he was driven on as it were by inexorable necessity. The City, at the point at which they touched it, looked superb; for the sun was full out and the life and brightness of the streets was a thing to make the heart glad. Stephen had no sense here of the crushing weight of life; he felt far too strongly for that the pressing and intricate detail of the business machine. Besides, here were large shops, shops where they sold books and splendid things, offices where enormous masses of trade were reduced to order and made negotiable; shops and offices where the real occupations of men were illustrated. So while Roy's heart sank, Stephen's mounted. Every moment increased Stephen's sense of liberty, of belief in the organizing power of man in the hive: every moment increased Roy's paralysing dread.

"Here," suddenly said Roy; and they went into a big building and up many stone stairs. There was a swing door, and a general air of varnish and crystallized glass. A boy of about fourteen came round from behind a partition. He wore a high collar of many days' standing; and his appropriate name was Grubb.

"Hallo!" he said, with a grin. "Wodger want?" That was because he saw Roy.

In another moment they were in the manager's room,

where the manager, a hard-faced man with a very delightful smile, received them. He looked rather curiously at the two of them as they went in, and left Stephen to explain his call.

"See, you've been away from home for a month or two, haven't you?" he asked. "The boy's been alone . . . with his father." He was addressing Stephen, at whom he looked with no unfriendliness at all.

"Yes."

The man nodded. He was able quite easily to understand the situation.

"Your brother's been at a loose end. It's a pity, because he's not a bad boy. Of course we shan't prosecute. In fact I hardly expected to see him to-day. I gave him a talking to last night. He won't say what he's done with the money. He'd better get another job—where there's not the temptation. One's bound to take a certain amount of risk; and I'd give him another chance myself if we had anything to turn him on to. Bound to happen if there's a temptation, you know. But I expect this wouldn't have happened if you'd been at home, eh?"

"No, it wouldn't!" blurted out Roy. "He's a brick!"

iii

From the City they went again to the West End, for it was Stephen's day to call at *The Norm* office. There he met with an unexpected piece of news which put him in high glee. It was to the effect that for the present *The Norm* would be continued, as calculations had shown the dilettante proprietor that if he carried it on for another year it might begin to pay, or at least to get so near to paying that he might sell it to advantage as a going concern. For the time, therefore, Stephen was safe, unless this rather arbitrary proprietor should once again change his mind and decree otherwise.

"Don't be too sure!" advised the editor. "He's tender now. At any moment . . . Of course I should get six months' salary and drop into something. And I should keep in touch with you."

The editor was a fat jovial-looking man from the North of England, who took himself very seriously, but who took everything else with a superabundance of jocosity which adjusted matters and made him an agreeable companion. He was curious about Stephen, and had once asked him to lunch in order to understand him better. But as the experiment had not been a success, and as Stephen never knew whether he ought to ask the editor back again, their acquaintance remained that of a capable editor and his industrious, reliable assistant, without developing, as it might well have done, into a friendship based upon mutual esteem. On this occasion he beguiled a few moments with scandalous anecdote, and sent Stephen away with a bright red load under his arm and a very black load off his heart.

"We'll get some lunch," said Stephen to Roy.

iv

It was at lunch that they began for the first time to talk.

"It'll be best if you come home with me now," said Stephen. "I mean home to Hampstead. We'll put you up for a bit. Don't go on. . . . I know you won't do it, though. It's such a beastly thing. Once you start, you go on. . . . You can't help it. But if you pull up now . . . D'you see?"

"Yes," said Roy. "I say, Steve . . . You've been jolly good. I mean to say, I thought . . . Well, I was afraid you'd snarl. I won't do it . . . you know I won't. I felt rotten; but I suppose I went off my head. I know she's no good, and all . . . I've been swanking. . . ."

Stephen nodded.

"D'you think you'll want to go back?" he asked.

"Not if . . . See, it's been so beastly—evenings, you know; and the place all quiet. Only the old man. He got on my nerves. He's been crazy about you. I've had yards of it. Yards. Like what he said this morning. Over and over again. So I stopped out. I got fed up with it. And I was with young Tom; and she—Emerald—was with another girl. We talked to them. She's . . . she lives in Slapperton. Her father's a window-cleaner, a little drunken chap with about a hundred kids. She's . . . I couldn't help it, somehow: Tom's given the other one—her friend—a little brooch; and Emerald started dropping hints about how she wished she'd got somebody to give her things. For a long time I didn't take any notice; and then she started going off with another fellow. I tried to give her up. I went home every evening. Couldn't go with Tom, 'cause he was with *his* one. And the old man was worse than ever. Then I met her one Saturday and we went to the pictures, and I . . . well, I blued all I'd got, getting her some bangles. Hadn't got much. It's gone on. I told her I was getting two pounds a week. I got some clothes . . . . and a ring and a cane. *You* know. . . . But the old man's had a lot. Really, he has. He's been taking it out of my pockets. When he gets a bit 'on' he's got the cunning of the very devil. . . ."

Stephen did not check this quick, mumbled monologue. The whole thing was tumbling out now that he had ceased to question; and the strained, earnest voice of Roy was a good enough indication of his sincerity. Stephen felt sick as he realized the picture, and saw that ugly, uninviting home again before his eye. Yet before his marriage he had tried to wean Roy from the old man and had found his very effort checked and countered by some adroit move on the old man's part. Dorothy had been

easy: she would on no account have stayed at home: and a talk with Mrs. Evandine long before had relieved his mind about her immediate future. But for Roy the father and brother had struggled long and silently; and in the end Roy had under pressure manifested so decided a wish to stay with the old man that Stephen with foreboding had submitted to his choice. And this was the outcome. Well, it was over.

"He's been mad about you and Minnie. He found something out about it in a letter he showed me. Then he got on to Bayley; and they both cried with drunkenness. I saw them in the street, leaning on each other. . . . But the old man only tried to find out . . . about Minnie. And he made up a long yarn. At first Bayley wanted to fight him. That was when he was only half tipsy. Later on it was all the other way round. I say, you know: Minnie's left him. She's doing dressmaking or something. She lives somewhere off City Road . . . a little street. Looks awful. . . ."

"Oh." Stephen felt his blood stir; he felt it in his cheeks. "Where's she living? D'you know where it is? Good God!" he said, under his breath.

Roy managed to dig up the name of the street from the recesses of his memory.

"I told her she ought to let you know," he said. "But she wouldn't. She started crying when I said that. . . ."

V

They finished their lunch and went to the Tube again. Stephen heard the boys shouting as they trudged through the crowded Strand down towards Charing Cross. Big bills in all kinds of type, all colours of ink, roared at them. "CRICKET: LUNCH SCORES" or "SUSSEX ALL OUT" and some racing information in smaller type at the foot. Taxicabs hummed along, and there was a great press of people, like a released theatre audience,

forced into the roadway by their excessive numbers. A lazy heat burned the air and made the very roadway a medium for further heat. In the Tube all was cool. A gust of wind met them in the passages leading to the trains, like a November gale.

At Hampstead it was as though they had reached the country. The winding street to the Heath was as alluring as ever. Here nobody hurried; for all seemed bent upon some pleasant hasteless errand. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, so slow had been their progress; and the sun, though now declining, was still oppressively fierce. Here as one ascended to the heights there was a gentle breeze, stirring languidly the sweeping bunches of green that cast so exquisite a shadow. They breathed more freely, glad to be released from the troubles of the earlier day.

As they approached the cottage Stephen pressed forward, thinking only of the way in which he might best relieve Minnie's necessities. He could think of nothing else, and was hardly aware of Roy's presence at his side. But when they came nearer he looked on ahead. At the other end of the pleasant little road he saw two figures, walking towards him. Both were unmistakable, and the recognition of both sent a fresh pang to his heart, compared with which no single moment of the day had carried an equal unhappiness. Instinctively he looked aside at Roy, who was gazing about him with undisguised interest and wonder. Stephen shrugged; but his shrug was one of misery; for Hilary was walking with Priscilla back to the cottage, and Priscilla had not seen Stephen because she was listening to Hilary and looking towards him.

CHAPTER XXII: MINNIE

i

MINNIE was busy with the sewing-machine when Stephen called at the address Roy had given him. He went into a very dirty passage with brown wall-paper against which a million people had leant, and saw it peeling away at the joints. The woman who opened the door was haggard and only half dressed, with a long dressing-gown on top of her deshabille: she called up the stairs, "Missus Bayley!" "Missus Bay-lee!" and other variants upon Minnie's name with an air of long-suffering that was ridiculous. Then she allowed Stephen to ascend, which was a privilege he did not expect, since he knew from experience that tenants of a ground floor have generally sufficient goodwill to those resident in upper floors to exclude anybody likely to be a dun. He went up and up until the whir of Minnie's machine struck his ear. Even so, his knock did not reach her, so loud and engrossing was the fierce buzz of the gyrating wheel: and when at last he entered she stopped her work with a blanched face. The tears started to her eyes. Instinct, however, reinforced her self-control.

"Hallo!" said Minnie. "Never expected to see *you!*"

Stephen closed the door and put his hat down. The room, so drab and so bare in every detail of its repulsive dinginess, was like a blow. It would be impossible to be cheerful in such a room. To work in it was to taste the sheer horror of solitary confinement.

"I only heard yesterday that you were here," he said. "Have you been doing this long?"

She smiled at him and stretched her hands out to him

across the top of the sewing-machine—a weary but ingratiating gesture.

"Well, it's fine to see you!" she said. "No, I haven't been here long. You heard I'd left him? Couldn't stand it. He got mixed up with that old gaffer of yours—a fine pair of them. And he lost his job too. That meant he was always hanging about!" She smiled, and as her lips drew back they revealed her beautiful teeth. Although her cheeks were pale her teeth and her warm soft brown eyes remained singularly lovely. But Stephen could tell how thin she was. Her hands, which for a moment had been held by his own, were wasted. "Well, what was the good of staying? It isn't as though I'd ever had a baby or anything to keep me there. And it isn't as though I cared a pin for him. You know there's only one man I ever did that for." She had left off smiling, and was quite grave again now, watching him with a meditative air. "You don't look as if you were happy, Stephen," she said sharply. "It's not me, is it? He hasn't been worrying you about me—your old gaffer, I mean?"

In spite of Stephen's disclaimer, Minnie rose from her sewing-machine and drew him to the window, so that she might look at him with the more attention.

"I didn't come here to be looked at," Stephen said, with a half-smile; "but to look at you. And now I see you I see that this sort of thing can't go on. . . . It's terrible, Minnie."

"Well, if *I* was your wife I should feel worried about you. I know *that* much. Look at your face!" She took his arm and pressed it to her side. "She wouldn't mind that, if she could see it—would she? Perhaps she would, though." For a moment they stood thus, and then she released his arm. "Think so?" Minnie added, with a sigh.

"I want to know what you're doing," said Stephen,

turning back to the room and indicating the machine. "How much you're making: and what you need. And also, I want to know how long you mean to stay in this filthy hutch. It can't be done, Minnie."

She laughed a little: but her lips trembled. The pallor round her eyes was the more noticeable because the eyes themselves were so bright and tender. Some women use belladonna to lend such brightness: but Minnie had no need of other drugs than her love for Stephen.

"Don't be cross with me," she begged, and again laid her hand upon his arm. "I had to come somewhere. That—what's on the machine there and those other things"—she pointed into a gloomy corner with her free hand—"are shirts. I get two bob a dozen for machining them and doing the buttonholes. The woman on the ground floor gets them all ready cut out from the factory, and she gives them out to me and half a dozen others. Then she does the finishing herself. She's a funny woman. . . . Very proud. She says she 'don't asshoshiate' with the people in this neighbourhood. She's rather pally with me though. . . ."

"But look here, Minnie. It can't go on. You can't live like this." He was stern, because he thought she was trying to evade him.

"And it's *not* going on, if I can help it," she answered with a sudden vehemence. "But I had to come somewhere. I had to get something to do. When you don't know a soul to help you it's not so easy as it might seem. I made up my mind to come away. Next thing—get something to do. When I'm more confident I shall get more ambitious. I shall be a finisher: I shall cut out: I shall go into a suburb and be a dressmaker. I've worked it all out. 'Madame Bayley,' or 'Madame Minnetta.' See them flock! Follow the crowd!" She was pretending a gaiety that was practically all of it a defence.

Stephen grunted. It might be a practical, but it certainly was not an ideal, scheme of life.

"Have you got any money?" he demanded, as a first attempt to ascertain a necessary fact.

"Oh, yes," she said airily. "A fair sum. And now what about you?"

"How *much* money have you got?" inquired Stephen.

"Oh, bother! You're a regular Nosey Parker!" Minnie cried, with a wretched attempt to bluff him. "Why, I'm rolling in it!"

Stephen shook his head gloomily. He was not deceived. The attempt made him the more suspicious.

"I'm afraid you haven't got any," he said. "I don't believe you've got any at all."

"Yes I have—in that box!" Minnie pointed into the dullness.

He made a step towards the mantelpiece, upon which the box lay: and she moved quickly to intercept him. For a moment she clung to him with her arms, and then, upon an impulse, darted her head forward and kissed his cheek.

"There!" she cried. "Don't look in the box! It's got my treasures. And, really, I've got two shillings there as well. I'm saving!"

ii

As quickly as before she drew back and surveyed Stephen from a distance. He made no further movement towards the box. He looked from the faded, stained wall-paper to her face, into which, at her own boldness, a faint tinge had come. Her eyes were sparkling; for her Stephen was the only man in the world.

"Two shillings is not enough," he said dryly.

"Old sober! Well, it's better than being the other way. But, Stephen . . . what's the matter with you? I mean, of course you're shocked at me. I know you're

that. You think I've forgotten you're a married man, and all that. Don't you? No: I know you're not shocked. But you look miserable. Oh crikey! Isn't there a lot of that in this world!" She broke off with a long sigh. "My word! What a lot there is! And not a soul cares for anybody else's but their own. It's true, you know. It's a funny thing—you've always been everything to me; and you *can't*—couldn't understand it. But I understand. Is . . . is your . . . you know, your wife . . . is she happy? I'd like to see her one day. You know, not to talk to; but——"

"Minnie! Minnie!" cried Stephen, "don't talk like that! Of course you shall see her. And she shall talk to you. She'll talk to you. D'you think she can't understand you?"

"Oh, no." Minnie shook her head. "I shouldn't like to talk to her . . . I should feel I was playing it low down, talking to her—and her not knowing who I was. And if she knew, she wouldn't want to talk to me. Not a nice woman wouldn't!"

Stephen took her hand in order to emphasize his explanation.

"She knows—" he began. "I've told her all about everything . . . every word."

"Oh, that's why you're miserable!" cried Minnie in a flash. "That's certain!"

"Yes. That's why."

"You must be pretty sure of her to tell her so soon," Minnie said, with a rueful air. "Alfred didn't start telling me anything of that sort till we'd been married a couple of years. And *then* he was drunk."

Stephen groaned. The reference seemed to make his heart bitter within him.

"Yes . . . but you see I'm not Alfred," he said slowly, and at her murmur he went on to explain. "No: she's gone right away from me. But that's nothing. She

knows who you are. I've told her everything. And she'll understand. D'you see? I shall ask her if I may bring you to see her."

Minnie laughed—a dreadful nervous titter at a suggestion so naïve.

"A lot you know about it!" she said. "You try it on!"

"I will!" answered Stephen. "You'll see."

"It's not human nature."

"No: it's Priscilla," was his retort. "That's a different thing. She's real."

iii

Minnie mused for a moment at that. She sat down again at her machine, with her arms across it, thinking.

"Priscilla," she repeated. "It's a nice name, isn't it?" Then she laughed a little. "So that's where you were that evening. Funny! My saying 'nice' brought it all back. I was soppy that night. I didn't know what I was saying. When I got there and you were out I thought I should have flopped down. I felt quite sick . . . kept hoping you'd come in. And then when you came I was worked up. Did you know I used to come and see Dorothy? She never let on. She's a real sport. I used to come and hear what you were doing, and see what you'd written—not that I could read it. Too educated for me. And you never knew I'd been anywhere there. No good now you're married. It wouldn't do. When I heard you were going to be married it nearly killed me. I seemed to go all soft. Did you feel sorry for me? Did you think about me? Oh, I *do* talk—don't I? And your Priscilla . . . I *would* like to see her. You'll never understand what it is to love anybody that doesn't love you. Feel you could let them trample on you; and they wouldn't dream of doing it. You needn't begin to frown. I'm not ashamed of saying it. Why should I be? *She* wouldn't like me. *She's* never

been married to Alf Bayley! If she had—my word! Then she'd know a little bit more about what life was. Don't you think so?"

Stephen took no notice of the long speech. He heard it: the words pierced through to his heart. He saw Minnie made wise by suffering which had been hard to bear. He tried to imagine a meeting between Minnie and Priscilla. Well? His mind did not shrink from it, though his heart did. He thought Minnie might behave badly, as she did when she was not at ease, when she became self-conscious, moved about, and twisted her lips. But here, now, he admired her as he had never done. He was puzzled at finding her so. How could he know the lonely hours she had spent thinking of him? How could he guess that her love for him was as great as Priscilla's love? And perhaps greater, because it had never looked for any return beyond the kindness he would have given his least friend.

"What I feel," he suddenly blurted out, "is the amount of harm a man can do who tries to go straight and . . . Here are you . . . and my wife . . . and . . . I think you're perfectly splendid, you know. . . . Look here, Minnie: I must go. If I start talking I shall get sentimental."

"And I shall lose my character!" she said, starting up. "My friend downstairs will have a fit. Not proper, you know! Well, I shall see you again . . . shall I?"

"And Dorothy?"

Minnie smiled with an archness that made her eyes seem big and mysterious.

"Oh, you're a great big baby!" she said. "D'you think I don't get a letter every week from Dorothy? Why, I know *she's* engaged. She hasn't been here. I don't want her to come here. It'd make her cry. She's such a soft-hearted kid. Good-bye, my dear; and God bless you."

She remained behind the sewing-machine and extended her hand, as though she were frightened that he would try to kiss her. Stephen took the hand she held out, and pressed it hard.

"You're splendid," he said breathlessly. "Good-bye. You'll hear . . . you'll see me again."

He closed the door and stumbled down the stairs; and Minnie, standing still behind her machine, looked at the hand he had pressed as if it were something strange. Then with a quick almost furtive gesture she raised it to her lips.

"The dear!" she said in a minute, and meditatively rubbed her check with her hand, looking into a far distance, lost in reverie.

CHAPTER XXIII: DANGER

i

SKEFFINGTON was inclined to be interested in Roy as the latest example of Moore Psychology made known to him. In Roy he saw none of the grim endeavour which he respected in Stephen, none of the good temper and sanguine spirits of Dorothy. Instead, there was the puzzling half-bakedness of youth, when—as at night all cats are said to be grey—there comes a time when one young man seems very much like another young man of his own age and tradition. Skeffington, who often came to see the Moores, was quietly interested in all that he saw in their house. All that curious electrical nervousness which made him talk at times foolishly sank into nothingness when he was receptive. Accordingly he surveyed this small family with the beaming eye of affection, minutely interested in their doings and their natures. And Roy interested him because—in a phrase—Skeffington was waiting to see how the cat would jump. If it jumped amiss, into the pocket—let us say—of the old man, or into the pocket of ordinary business which has such a gaping mouth, then Skeffington supposed, somewhere in a remote consciousness where such probabilities were disinterestedly canvassed, that the good of Roy would be lost, and that he would become irrevocably like his fellows. On the other hand, Skeffington was ready to imagine that Roy might grow towards the sun, as flowers do, and like them expand and flourish into a spiritual individuality. What particular technical form this might take for its exemplification Skeffington did not care. Roy might jump towards a scientific career, or he might abide in a tabernacle: he might be a painter,

or he might go to sea. All that mattered, in Skeffington's belief, was that Roy should not jump wrongly in the first instance and stultify himself. It was this thought which made him, after examining the new-comer by the light of nature and reporting thereafter to his own imagination, say to Stephen with a mixture of cocksureness and hesitation:

"That brother of yours. . . . Have to be careful of him, you know."

ii

The occasion of this remark was a walk undertaken by the two men upon Hampstead Heath, where they had thrown themselves on the grass. Both were lazily smoking, propped upon their elbows, and watching the shimmer of the hot air just above the earth. They had become firm and even intimate friends; for Skeffington had a very clear perception, and he was entirely free from that conventional breeding which Stephen disliked so much. Also, he had his own point of view, and he acted as a tonic to Stephen, who, from long solitude, was inclined to be immovable. In addition to the kind affection which David felt, Skeffington had the novelist's powerful moral prepossessions; and where David on the whole preferred to allow Stephen's attitude to go unchallenged (rarely arguing with him, but merely as it were collecting and supplementing his views) Skeffington raised his own standard and raked Stephen's principles with a hot fire of merriment. The fact that they thought much alike made their differences the more piquant; and the differences themselves increased their friendship. Stephen could not easily refer to his affections; but Skeffington, with much greater *savoir-faire*, made no secret of his. Likes and dislikes he expressed freely, but so lightly that it is to be hoped that nobody mentally accused him of malice. Of malice he had none

—only a quick judgment, a ready tongue, and a fund of eager nonsense.

They lay in the shadow of a tall bush, so thick that the sun could penetrate its interstices only at rare points. A little breeze fluttered idly above them, but so fitfully as to be hardly noticeable. They were looking down a hill, and the view before them was of more bushes, and hedges, and then fields barely broken by houses, until a number of villas, very new, but not as ugly as they might have been, shared the view with its other, more lovely, beauties. Skeffington was sending thin blue spirals of smoke from the bowl of his pipe, luxuriating in complete ease.

"Fortunate fellows we are!" he observed. "If we only knew it."

"Being here, you mean?" Stephen asked. "Or anyhow?"

"Both. And being able to keep quiet, too. Not that I'm doing it. I say, that chap Badoureau's a rum un, isn't he!"

Stephen was conscious of a thrill at the name and at the tone. He changed his position, so as to rest upon the other elbow, whereby he was able to see Skeffington's face. Skeffington also moved; but that was because he had put his hands behind his head, which he thus supported just sufficiently to continue his smoking without inconvenience. He was looking up in the air, where, amid the blue, he saw through his little glasses what seemed to be a continuous atmospheric movement before his eyes.

"Badoureau," said Stephen. "Is he?" He tried to make his voice indifferent—with what success he could not tell.

"Don't you think so?" It was clear that Skeffington was not to be bounced.

"I don't like him very much," admitted Stephen, curtly. "In fact I dislike him. But apart from his

arrogance I don't know anything . . . He's a very bad, conventional thinker."

"Yes, that's the tradition, of course. He's coming to tea with me to-day. I baked this morning, so I shall give him some of my little cakes; but it's a bore. I'm not interested in him. He's not interesting. He'll be cheerful enough, I expect."

"I thought the Evandines liked him—found him interesting," said Stephen, vaguely. It was not by any very genuine impulse that he thus momentarily ranged himself as a defender of Hilary.

Neither spoke for several minutes, but both continued to smoke and to gaze upon the scene without for a moment paying any conscious attention to it.

"Funny little cat that is of yours," Skeffington went on, after a long pause. "He's developed a great feeling of friendship for me. Something like Badoureau, in fact; though I prefer Romeo. Romeo doesn't like my singing. It's painful to him. You don't like it much yourself. . . . If I whistle, he miaws in protest. . . . He's like a child."

Stephen puffed away for a little while, meditatively.

"You know Badoureau pretty well, don't you?" he asked.

"Oh," said Skeffington, "I've known him for some time. He's taken lately to coming to see me; but that's a new habit. . . . We haven't any intimacy."

Stephen's teeth closed more firmly upon the stem of his pipe. He read into Skeffington's words a warning to himself. Sluggishly in his brain were running many thoughts, all bidding him beware of Badoureau. He would have ignored them if it had not been for his present difficult relation with Priscilla. That relation, and the knowledge that he purposed still further taxing Priscilla's generosity by mentioning his visit to Minnie, and his desire that she should see Minnie, made every thought

of Hilary one of burning trouble. Nevertheless, he was enabled to answer as though he could afford to ignore danger from Hilary.

"He comes pretty often to see us," Stephen said casually.

"Yes. What do you talk about?" A smile curved Skeffington's lips. Other people, seeing him smile, generally began to smile also, which was a very pleasant fact in his life.

Stephen thought solemnly.

"He brings us the news of the *beau monde,* I think," he said at length. "Galleries, and music, and so on. . . . As a matter of fact I don't listen to him."

"Why don't you see those things for yourself?" Skeffington suddenly inquired, with a criticism in his voice. "You ought to. It's not fair on Mrs. Moore. . . . You ought to run about a bit."

Stephen's heart seemed to begin to beat in his throat. He moved restlessly upon the grass.

"I've thought of that," he admitted. "I thought of that more than a year ago. I don't think she wants that sort of thing."

"I suppose you mean *you* don't," said Skeffington, with a smile. "I was only thinking of Badoureau as a privileged purveyor. It would do you good to nose about a bit. You see, Moore, you've got a lot to learn. We all have, more or less. Even I. Even the perfectly informed David Evandine. By the way, I should like very much to see how far your sister will modify his general omniscience. It won't be perceptible, of course. No, Moore: the fact is, you're an innocent. So's Badoureau. But you're a man with brains. He isn't. Though you wouldn't think so, that's a vital difference." He turned his head sharply at that, and glanced shrewdly at his friend. "But I expect you exaggerate it already," he added coolly.

"I'm generally supposed to," answered Stephen, with equal coolness; "though in point of fact I don't."

"Badoureau's got a mind like a mud bank. You throw a stone into it, and nothing happens. The stone stays exactly—absolutely—where it falls. It doesn't crystallize or dissolve; it stays there like a nugget. And I suppose some time or other gets washed out again." Skeffington paused. He was speaking quite cheerfully, and without venom; as though stating a simple fact. "He's a very very typical young man of his class—correctly educated, with all the hard, unimaginative self-righteousness of the Churchman, and the intelligent mediocrity of the civil servant. He's for Church and State—not God and man. . . . It's a vital difference, Moore!"

"Is it?" said Stephen dourly. "All this doesn't touch my feeling about Badoureau."

"What's that, then? Yours is only indifference, perhaps?"

"No, no. It's a resentment. I think he's arrogant. I think he's typical of a class, perhaps."

"Yes, I think that. Certainly. You see, he's never *done* anything."

"I suppose not. I think of him as an Empire-builder wasted. I should have thought he might do something in a few years. Unfortunately he seems to have too much money."

"I don't think he'll ever do anything, except be a sport, a regular good fellow, a ladies' man, and a good Rugby footballer—I must admit he can play football; but only because of his weight and his speed. And what does that mean? When he's thirty he'll be a veteran: he'll have lost his speed. And where is he? I ought to have said that of course he's a dilettante. He can talk about Giotto and the Siennese school; and he likes César Franck, and can tell you what's the matter with the modern English composers. But what's the good of

that? He only tells you what everybody else tells you. There's nothing original in it. He's simply a product! And that means he'll go through life a shallow, unimaginative, selfish creature, rather fine and mysterious in his insensitiveness, the type English people most admire; but quite unteachable except by some such bastard abstract idea as Empire or Honour. That's not my ideal, nor yours. We want good men, modest men, wise men; not these swaggering hounds that push everywhere because they're too stupid to understand anything but physical prefulgence or absolute social convention. Damn! My pipe's gone out."

"So I should think," said Stephen. "And I must say that I don't think you'd get many people to agree with you, either about the type or about Badoureau. Of course I see there's something in it—or feel there is."

"Well, I'm right, for all that," said Skeffington, lazily. "Now, about Badoureau. It's a curious thing that the only person who's really seen through him all the time is Mrs. Evandine."

"Oh, *you* think that," said Stephen, slowly.

"I know it. So do you."

"I thought it, certainly. But you seem to know Mrs. Evandine more intimately than I do."

"No. I've been there several times lately when he's been there. I'm in the habit of noticing things. And it's remarkable that I always prefer to notice people who are in the background. You learn more. It's much more instructive than watching the protagonists. Now Mrs. Evandine is in every way admirable."

"Certainly. Wonderful." Stephen thought for a moment. "One thing that strikes me, Skeffington, is—why on earth do you keep up a sort of friendship with Badoureau?"

"Without quarrelling with him I can't break it off. Mind you, I'd tell him what I've told you except that

I don't know him well enough to be candid. I'm sick of the fellow. He haunts me. I've had him two or three times a week for the last six weeks. . . ."

"Auch!" cried Stephen in disgust. How many times, then, had Hilary seen Priscilla? And if she was seeing him, why did she not say? "I say, I . . . can't stay here any longer . . . I feel as though my bones were broken. Let's walk a little." He stumbled to his feet. If she were seeing Badoureau, why on earth . . . why on earth . . . As he set a match to his pipe his hands were shaking. He was filled with consternation. How many times had Badoureau been to the cottage? He had been to Skeffington's two or three times a week. . . . He had been at Totteridge—he had gone to Totteridge thinking she would be there. It was clear. . . . It was clear. Stephen doubted not that Hilary loved Priscilla. His thought would go no further than that. He could not bear to think that Priscilla . . .

"Here—here—here!" cried Skeffington. "Second speed, old chap! I'm not a racing car!" Together they walked across the Heath, but Stephen answered at random to everything his companion said.

iii

Skeffington was engaged in praising Mrs. Evandine. For the moment he was full of enthusiasm for her as for one whose stored and inexhaustible riches of wisdom might still be appreciated solitarily by himself. With a naïve delight in his own perceptiveness, he acclaimed Mrs. Evandine. In her he found a reality of knowledge greater even that that possessed by her daughter, for whom also his admiration was genuine.

"It needs a man like myself," he was saying, with a return to his customary egotistical method, "to appreciate the *fineness* of Mrs. Evandine. Henry James is the one

man who understands these larger things better than I do; and he'd simply dote on Mrs. Evandine. You may say—and I won't altogether contradict you, though I'd admit it was an extreme statement—you may say he'd see more than is there. That may be so. But I see the fact. I delight in the illustration. What more? I'm not talking of writing round her. All I do is to observe. I tell you, Moore, Mrs. Evandine is absolutely the most remarkable woman I ever met. I commend her to you. You'll find . . . Of course you know that she's your friend? Her account of you is quite perfect. . . . I tell you this, also: that if I were in a difficulty I'd go to Mrs. Evandine. Do your hear that?"

Stephen disengaged himself from the flurry of his perturbation.

"What's that?" he asked. Then, recovering the words from his unconscious memory, he repeated them: "If I were in a difficulty I'd go to Mrs. Evandine. Was that it?"

"It was so. Remember!"

Stephen turned the words in his mind reflectively. For a moment he could not consider them. Then, with an effort, he brought his attention to bear upon their meaning. In a difficulty. . . . Was he not in a difficulty? Mrs. Evandine? A warm memory of that lady as he had last seen her in the doorway at Stalcett came into his mind. His expression changed. It lightened. He looked aside at Skeffington as upon one who had brought good tidings, half smiling in spite of his anxiety.

"Yes," he said, willingly. "I think you're quite right. Quite right."

iv

But although he spoke with such conviction Stephen soon returned to his miserable contemplation of the

threatened danger. Was he so sure that there was a danger? He certainly at this time had no distrust of Priscilla. All he thought was that she might unwittingly be allowing herself to slip into indiscretion, driven thither without reflection by her bewildered distress. Of Hilary's feeling, on the other hand, he had no doubt. Every recollection of Hilary's behaviour to him showed Stephen that Hilary was his implacable opponent, and that Hilary was a man who set his own wish before every other consideration. It was a part of his dislike of Hilary that he saw this opponent so ruthless in the pursuit of his desire. Stephen's attitude was antagonistic: he most desired the happiness of those he loved. It was by an irony that he should, in spite of this will, be an instrument to bring unhappiness where he most wished its opposite. Scruples beset him at every point: only resolute determination to work for his aim made those scruples impotent. If he were to fail, if at any point he should lose heart, then his scruples, like those jackals in the tale, which waited without the eremite's cell ready to rush in and devour him whensoever he succumbed to evil temptation, would be overwhelming. Then they would fall upon his will and paralyse it, so that Stephen would become like any other battered idealist. But this doleful possibility was not yet. Will for will he could yet beat Hilary, so long as he should not be betrayed by circumstance. His problems remained unsolved, as they had been more than a year before—Roy, Minnie, Priscilla. Only Dorothy, by the interposition of another force, and by no direct result of any action of Stephen's, had won the first stage to freedom. The old man was still to be finally overthrown, though his end seemed to be, and in fact was, in sight.

What wonder, therefore, that Stephen, whose other difficulties might be said to have reached their climax, found this dangerous and baffling diversion a thing

almost past bearing? If he lost Priscilla to another man —her love, that is to say—there would be nothing for him but disaster. He did not trust Hilary. He did not recognize his code of manners. Was his code of morals equally untrustworthy? Only by putting out a hand to detain his friend did Skeffington continue really to walk in his company! And how much did Skeffington know, or guess? How much did he understand? To Stephen this hitherto unclouded afternoon had become like a hideous dream—converted in an instant by a single, seemingly innocent, statement of fact. How unhappy he was! As ever, his unhappiness lay in uncertainty, for armed with knowledge he was cap-à-pie for combat.

CHAPTER XXIV: THE DANGER UNMASKED

i

WHEN Stephen returned from his walk with Skeffington Roy was with Priscilla, and Irene was bringing in the tea. Romeo, sitting in an arm-chair supposed to be Stephen's, was smiling at the world and daintily washing his toes. For Romeo this operation presented no difficulties. He put his paw out as does the newly engaged girl when she wears her ring for the first time, spreading her fingers apart. He then raised his paw with the most graceful of gestures and presented it to his mouth. Thenceforward Romeo's every lithe richly coloured movement was a delight to the eye, and his exquisitely pink tongue seemed to represent the quintessence of his nature.

Roy sat in a similar arm-chair rather sheepishly watching Romeo. The few days he had spent at Hampstead had done him a great deal of good. For one thing he was recovering some of his self-respect through the behaviour of Priscilla and Stephen. For another he was rid of the almost intolerable dread with which his first experiment in illegitimate money-getting had poisoned his recent days. That was over, like a bad dream. The raw ugliness of Emerald, with her early mature materialistic horse-sense, was seen by him with such exactitude that he marvelled at his dead infatuation. It had been the result of an impulse which he had called "swank": in an atmosphere where "swank" did not appear to be a necessity, where, in fact, he discerned nothing but peace (so inscrutable are the manners of men and women), he had become a boy again. In a few days more he would make up his mind that he must begin to work; and then, with good fortune, Stephen thought that he could not

cease growing until he became a man. Stephen, consulted, would have attributed the change entirely to the influence of Priscilla. He regarded that as a sovran cure for all base impulses.

ii

That was the feeling that made Stephen still keep his head in spite of all. He loved Priscilla above all things. So he too, entering this pretty room with its sparse furniture, found the atmosphere reassuring. The fever which had lately possessed him sank to an undercurrent. His pleasure at seeing Priscilla there, in a very simple dress of blue linen, with her delicate fair face and fair hair looking so adorable, was intense. Nothing whatever could rob him of that delight. Her clear eyes, her indescribably candid manner, her small head, her grace, all these moved him deeply. All were a part of his vision of her. And Priscilla's sober greeting—a glance and no more—filled him with pride. He looked from one to the other, until his eye rested upon Romeo, who had thrown himself upon his side and now looked coquettishly at the new-comer. Romeo knew very well that he was on Stephen's chair. Not in vain had he whimsically studied comfort during the whole of his short and nimble life. Stephen, however, upon this occasion ignored Romeo's ingratiating gestures. He happened not to want his chair. Instead, he turned to Roy.

"Have you been in, this afternoon?" he inquired. "Or out? It's been particularly fine."

"Er . . . Priscilla . . . er . . . and I went out for a walk," answered Roy, still a little conscious at the use of his sister-in-law's name. "We went down to the cricket ground," he added more cheerfully. "It's the cricket week; and they were playing some crack team—Hornsey, or Southgate, or somebody. Jolly fine, it was."

He made a further start. "Hampstead batted all the time we were there . . . *didn't* they!" He appealed to Priscilla.

"That's what the man told you," said Priscilla, smiling. "The man with the dog."

"So it might have been Hornsey or Southgate really," suggested Stephen.

"Anyway, they batted splendidly. I think it was Hampstead. And we met Mr. Badoureau there," said Roy innocently. "He wished he was playing. He played in his college team, but he says he wasn't good enough for the first-class matches. . . ."

Priscilla saw that Stephen's face went white.

iii

Irene had clambered out of the room again, breathing hard, and looking "perfectly globular," as Dorothy said. Dorothy's idea was that Irene was all curves, and opulent curves at that. She was very young, and very strong indeed—as strong as a horse; but youth and strength were not yet disciplined, so to speak, to the table. She either breathed very loud, or held her breath with startling results. When she held her breath her cheeks grew crimson and her eyes rolled and seemed to burst from her head. She always held her breath when talking to Stephen, as a result of extreme fear of him, as though she thought he might snap her up, or bite her; and her voice always at that moment disappeared. She became perfectly inaudible, and would come closer and closer to him, her eyes gaping. She had a secret passion for him, an awed respect that was almost religious. For Stephen she had this feeling; for Priscilla a protective pity allied to adoring marvel at one so incomparably beautiful. But that did not prevent Irene from bringing a small bundle in the morning and taking a large bundle away with her

at night. She was a mushroom, as Romeo was a little cat. Nothing more need be said. You cannot change a mushroom's spots.

When Irene had gone, shutting the door—as she usually did, through a miscalculation both of strength and distance—with a loud bang, Priscilla sat before the teapot and motioned Roy to his place. Stephen mechanically came to the table, and listlessly received his cup.

"Roy very much wanted to see the cricket," Priscilla said, in a moment. "You only heard of these matches this morning, didn't you, Roy?"

"No," said the artless Roy. "Yesterday Mr. Badoureau was talking to me about them. He said I ought to go. . . . He said you might like to see one for an hour or so. That's why I suggested it."

Priscilla and Stephen exchanged a long, steady glance —upon both sides a troubled one. Then Stephen abruptly changed the subject by saying:

"When shall we see Dorothy again? Will she come soon?"

Priscilla was puzzled at the change, however welcome it may have been. She answered him, and then went on with her tea. In the next cottage they heard voices, as was very often the case when Skeffington had a visitor, since the walls were so extremely thin.

"I bet that's Mr. Badoureau," said Roy, with a finger in the air.

"Very likely," admitted Stephen, coldly and dryly. "I believe he's very fond of coming to see Skeffington." This time he did not look up; but put a small piece of cake carefully into his mouth. Roy seemed to have nothing more to say, except:

"I pumice-stoned my fingers this morning. Better, aren't they!"

"Much better," agreed Stephen, with a grave glance. "They're getting on splendidly."

iv

When Roy had gone to bed that night, Priscilla and Stephen sat a little while together. Both would have liked to speak: both found it hard to do so. When Stephen began at last, with a great effort, Priscilla, though her heart beat faster, welcomed the words. Anything was better than silence.

"Does Badoureau come here a good deal?" he asked abruptly. His own heart was beating hard. Priscilla's eyes were dark; her voice trembled faintly.

"When you're not here? He's been several times to tea," she answered. "He's in this neighbourhood a good deal. . . . He goes to see Mr. Skeffington. . . ."

"I know. I got just a little uncomfortable. . . . You know I don't want to make you uncomfortable, too; but when I brought Roy home he was here, and . . . I suppose he's quite straight?"

Priscilla sat looking at him with a very curious—sadly smiling—expression upon her face.

"I've known him for several years. He's David's friend, and mine. He can be very rude; but I think he's very honest," she said. "And I've been rather glad to see anybody lately."

Stephen was struck by her tone. His first base thought was that she was remembering Minnie and thinking that he had no right to be censorious.

"My dearest," he said earnestly, "I wasn't thinking that—never that. It did occur to me that he might be being a nuisance. If you had said anything about him to me . . . But I know that we haven't had . . . we've not been talking much lately about ourselves."

"No," said Priscilla, still with that sober smile flitting upon her lips.

"Did you like the cricket this afternoon?"

Priscilla gave a miserable dry little laugh. She thought his change altogether too abrupt.

"No, Stephen," she said; "don't let's talk about the cricket. There's so much else to talk about. Do you really feel uncomfortable because Hilary sometimes comes to tea?"

"I don't know anything about these things. I want you to do whatever you like. It wasn't anything of that sort I meant; but I've seen him or heard of him several times; and Skeffington seems to have him there a good deal. He seems to have nothing to do. He doesn't live in Hampstead; yet he's always about. And he doesn't come when I'm here."

"Stephen!" Her cry was urgent.

"He doesn't like me. He's jealous of me, just as I'm jealous of him."

"Are you afraid of him?" Priscilla eagerly questioned.

"Only because he's got so much that I haven't got. I wonder . . . It's wrong, I know; but I suppose I'm conscious of being his inferior in physique, and education, and manner. Is that very pretty?"

"Stephen, I wish you'd tell me this. Are you afraid of him?"

Stephen looked straight at her.

"As a man," he answered, "no! As a lover—yes!"

Priscilla sat for a moment as though she were stunned by his words. Her hands were still clasped in her lap, as they had been all the time, and they did not now move.

"Oh, Stephen!" she said, in a breathless way. "Has it really come to this?"

V

Stephen did not answer at once. He thought they were heading direct for a misunderstanding; and that was the last thing he could afford to risk. At all costs,

even at a sacrifice of this moment of opportunity, it must be avoided.

"I wish we didn't always get so shaky when we talk like this," he said at last. "It puts us both on edge. I expect I've given you a wrong impression. It's come to nothing. Nothing. Except that I love you and that you've been punished for my fault. Very likely the fact that I'm in the wrong is always rankling. That may account for everything I feel. Don't think for a moment that I'm afraid of anything Badoureau can do to me. In that sense I'm not in the least afraid of him. My dear, you know that. Don't you?" She shook her head sadly. "Not even that? Well, we *are* in a mess!" For an instant his heart was leaden. He hesitated, in extremest fear. Then he plunged. "Let me say—let me say all I've got in my mind—nothing kept back. That's best, even if it hurts. And it's not what I started with—it's what's there at this instant, after what we've been saying. Is it possible that you've been glad to see him, and have got a lot of good from seeing him (because you're feeling rather wretched); and that he's . . . well, not misunderstood . . . but allowed himself to . . . perhaps to revive . . . a . . . an old feeling?" Why couldn't he say right out "Badoureau's in love with you, and I hate him for it"?

Priscilla had listened with a strained attention. Now she slipped from her chair and came to his side, kneeling there as she had done in their happy days. She too made her effort to preserve their mutual confidence.

"You *do* love me?" she asked. "And I think you trust me?"

"Absolutely," Stephen said in a firm voice. Priscilla laughed again; but this time naturally, though the laugh was not very cheerful.

"Doesn't it seem strange," she mused, "to think of our talking like this? It's horrible, too, Stephen. And

all because—you'd say because I've been too exacting, because I'm ignorant—innocent in a bad sense?"

Stephen slipped his arm round her shoulders, and she made no resistance, though she did not further yield herself.

"It's I who am wrong," he asserted. "I know it; but I can't help it. I began wrong and I'm going further and further wrong. If you want to see Badoureau, see him. But I think it's a danger. You'll see that for yourself. Because it's confirming you in your estrangement from me."

"No!" she cried impetuously.

"I think so. You get something from him—admiration, or sympathy. . . . Something. . . . You look to him for it. That's bound to take you away from me."

Priscilla moved restlessly, so that he dropped his arm.

"I wish you wouldn't say that," she said in a very low voice. "It's quite untrue."

"You don't think about it. But in a few weeks you'll find yourself drifted. . . ."

Priscilla turned to him. She laid her hands upon his knees.

"Before . . ." she said. "For three years. . . ."

"I hadn't injured you. You were thinking of me—loving me. Now, the situation is different. As long as you wholly trusted me, he was powerless. But now he's gone through all the fire of seeing you married to me, he suddenly finds you turning to him. . . . Oh, I think you're unwise, Priscilla! You don't know how things drift when you're unhappy. Think of me——"

"Oh!" cried Priscilla in abhorrence. "That's wholly different. You *don't* think——"

"It's only different because you're different, my dearest. Only that. Think. There was an unhappy girl, an unhappy man. Here——"

"Really, Stephen!" Priscilla protested again. She

half rose to her feet. "It's no good! It's no good! I can't bear to go on talking like this."

"If you were to see Minnie . . ." he began, and stopped. He had taken her hand.

"Stephen!"

"I should like you to. Do you *want* to love me?"

With a groan, Priscilla turned to him and put her arms round his neck.

"Do you really think I don't love you?" she asked in horror. "Why, my dearest, it's because I love you that I'm unhappy. I'm unhappy because I feel I'm treating you cruelly—being somehow ridiculous. . . . It humiliates me. And now . . . to suggest such a comparison! It's outrageous!"

Slowly Stephen shook his head, and held her tightly against him.

"So you've got no further than that?" he asked in a dead voice. "Are you really only being priggish?"

"You think that?" she breathed.

"If I begged you to see her?"

Priscilla remained silent for a space. The life seemed gone out of her body.

"What good would that do?" she asked.

"I've put all my hope in it. Either you'll drift away, or you'll drift back to me—unless you try really to understand me, and to understand Minnie. I want you to feel that you understand me. That's all. It may make you detest me. I'd take the risk of that. All I want is that you should know all the facts."

"Very well," said Priscilla. Her tone was dubious; but she was surprised at her own composure. How strange that the proposal no longer lacerated her beating heart. "I'll think about it."

"She's left her husband—a real scoundrel. A *real* scoundrel. She's trying to make money by machining cotton shirts. Roy told me so. I went to see her——"

"You went! You didn't tell me!" Her tone was quick with reproach. Well, had she told him about Hilary's visits? No: the case was different, as he quickly saw.

"Just now," Stephen said. "The day after Roy came. I wanted to talk to you, d'you see; and haven't liked to begin. I went there because, although she'd eventually have left him in any case, I thought . . . well, I thought I ought to go. If you could bring yourself to see her you'd love her—at any rate, like her. And after all—God knows, I've injured you both!"

Priscilla did not move. She remained in his arms, held to his breast.

"What would she think?" she presently asked.

"She thought you wouldn't."

"Did you speak of it to her then?"

"I said you *could* do it—that you were able to. I said you would. . . ."

Priscilla sighed deeply. There were so many things that puzzled her.

"I think you'd better let me go now," she said gently. "I think you've got a very strong will, Stephen, under your . . . persuasiveness." She drew away from him, and rose to her feet. As she stood before him with her head bent and her hand hanging by her side he looked up at her with a renewal of that pride which he had felt earlier. "Do you want me to go to see . . . Minnie; or will she come here?"

"As you wish," Stephen said. "She's in a horrible place though."

"I'll go to see her," said Priscilla. "You must give me the address. Give it to me now."

"Thank God!" He too rose, and lifted her hand to his lips. They had both forgotten Hilary.

CHAPTER XXV: PARENTAL SOLICITUDE

i

IT used to be possible—and may still be possible—to walk by direct roads from the flagstaff near the White Stone Pond at Hampstead to the pretty Hendon (now rendered less picturesque by shining villas and by the aeroplane hangars); and thence by field-paths, as the guide-books say, to Totteridge. It was certainly possible when Stephen and Priscilla walked from their cottage on the day after this talk and paid a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Evandine. They started early in the afternoon and arrived to tea; and at the house they found Dorothy and Mr. Vanamure, as well as Priscilla's father and mother. They found all these virtuous people sitting in the garden under the mulberry-tree, waiting for Biddy to bring out the cake-stand, and a little table, and the large tray. And Stephen remembered ancient days, with something like shame in his heart. He could so clearly remember coming back here and being rude to Mrs. Evandine and seeing Priscilla again for the first time after their obscure quarrel. It was like a dream—a dream such as one may have upon a summer's day, when the birds are chirping merrily or ill-temperedly among themselves, and when sparrows and starlings are discussing the characters of other sparrows and starlings which have appropriated all the tit-bits. And the party under the mulberry-tree, waiting contentedly for tea time, hailed with joy the advent of such welcome callers. Dorothy was the first to rise and walk impetuously towards them; but the others were very nearly as quick. Mr. Vanamure in especial was profound in his respectful salutations. He stood there with his soft eyes beaming and his rich beard

as dark as a fine chestnut; and it seemed to Priscilla that he could never have left off talking since she had last seen him. He still smoked the most magnificent cigars, the scent of one of which hurried across the lawn before him, racing with the sound of his mellifluous voice.

"A most unlooked-for and enchanting pleasure," said Mr. Vanamure. "I was inquiring only the other moment of good Mr. Evandine here whether you were both in the perfection of health."

"And now you see for yourself," said Priscilla, gently smiling, "that we are!"

"That *is* my pleasure," Mr. Vanamure assured her, with an additional bow of compliment.

"Oh, Priscilla, I'm so glad to see you!" cried Dorothy.

Mr. and Mrs. Evandine, if less effusive, were as cordial; and the matchless Biddy, approaching at this moment, smiled also in a delicious unbending of joy. Upon her finger lay a great hoop of gold, coruscating with gems, so that every available ray of sunshine darted to the spot, as birds to a crumb. It took away the breath of the visitors unexpectedly to see such splendour; but it is gratifying to record that their appetite remained staunch.

"Tea," said Mr. Vanamure, falling into a philosophic vein, "is of all meals the one which most charmingly permits the freedom of discourse. In this enchanting garden, with the birds . . ."

"Yiss," said Mr. Evandine hurriedly. "Very nice . . . very nice. And now, my dear Priscilla . . ."

"Don't *listen* to them!" whispered Dorothy; "but tell me how you are!"

What a pleasant tea it was! The afternoon was very warm, but there was a strong breeze, and the tree above their heads rustled in a lovely undersong to their thoughts and little speeches. Upon the air came the fragrance of

the garden, and the sweet noises that make summer afternoons such happily woven memories. The tinkle of the spoons, the sweet and insubstantial foods, the general air of kindness and courtesy, were as soothing to Priscilla as they were to Stephen. She found herself thinking of many other such days, when, after tennis or after some less strenuous pastime, she had enjoyed of old teas almost exactly comparable. She gave herself up to reverie, recalling a thousand things. . . . Then, when there had been a little pause, they noticed her smiling, and Dorothy invited her to declare the reason.

"I've been remembering other times when we've had tea here," Priscilla admitted. "And I was wondering what it was . . . what little nice thing I missed from this one. I've just thought of it."

"Oh, Priscilla! How nice of you!" cried Dorothy. "It's David, of course."

"Well, no!" hesitated Priscilla. "Not David, dear. . . . I'm so sorry it wasn't David. The one I missed was Romeo. I feel so strongly that Romie ought to be here, lying on the edge of my skirt."

"Now that's just beautiful!" exclaimed Mr. Vanamure. "Just beautiful! One can't help observing the benefits of association"—he bowed respectfully to Mr. Evandine —"with one who, if I may say so, has brought humane letters to a fine art."

"Ugh!" grunted Stephen; and Mr. Evandine flinched under the merry eyes of the two girls.

"Yiss, yiss," he said in perturbation. "And whawt, my dear Priscilla, has our friend Romeo been doing lately? Yiss."

Mrs. Evandine looked up hopefully. It sprang into her mind that what David had called the day of the evil Vanamure was nearing its end. When her husband showed signs of unrest she could begin to regard him once more as independent of adulation. She looked

comically at Stephen, whose grunt had reached her; and he, seeing her amusement, nodded in return. Nevertheless, Mrs. Evandine was sorry for Mr. Vanamure.

ii

When tea was finished, and when Biddy had taken indoors the remains of the meal, the party gradually dispersed. Mrs. Evandine and Stephen went a-walking in the garden, Dorothy and Priscilla remained in the shadow, and Mr. Evandine was followed to his room by a faithful satellite. There Mr. Evandine listened to a grave discourse disguised as an interrogatory, and did his utmost to appear more interested than in fact he was. It is a curious thing, that Mr. Evandine, seeing Stephen, of whom he was rather afraid, had become startlingly aware of his own weakness; and although he was a weak and amiable old gentleman he was not wedded to weakness, so that he saw Stephen as something better than Mr. Vanamure. He was full of eagerness to talk to his son-in-law, whose good opinion he now coveted; and it was by a pathetic irony of fate that Mr. Vanamure was present upon this otherwise unclouded afternoon. It was not, then, the merry glances of the girls which had disturbed Mr. Evandine: it was the silent incorruptible presence of Stephen which had sent a searching question to his self-respect. He sat with his admirer an embarrassed victim, much too polite to bid him go, but engaged in a private mesmeric endeavour, trying vainly to compass Mr. Vanamure's departure by means of hypnotic suggestion.

The girls had much to say to each other; and Mrs. Evandine was showing Stephen how very obstinate Minch could be. She had suggested certain changes in the bedding, which, she was convinced, would have been quite practicable. But Minch, called by her into counsel, had been obdurate. He had said that what she had wanted

could not be done; that, even if it could be done, it would be very costly, very unsatisfactory, very difficult, very unpleasant, very unnecessary. . . . And he had wriggled and twisted until Mrs. Evandine had been forced to abandon her idea.

"Doesn't it seem to you that it could be done?" she appealed.

"I should have thought so," answered Stephen, in his most solemn manner. "From here, you mean? . . ." He indicated the spot with his foot. Mrs. Evandine stooped and made motions with her hands. From behind a bush many yards away, where he had been stooping in the shade to tie up a wanton branch, the object of her maledictions watched them. The wicked Minch, unable to hear a word, breathed heavily at his knowledge of what was going on. He eyed Stephen in an unfriendly way, in case Stephen should emphatically declare that the alteration could and should be made. How wicked Minch was will never be known. He was a complete professional gardener; and these are evil men. It is the result of stooping so much in the sun.

"However," said Mrs. Evandine, "it's too bad to worry you about this. It's only an idea of mine; and the reason I asked you was that I want a moral support. When one comes to deal with a man like Minch one feels so powerless, so amateurish. He's able to assume the most contemptuous expression I ever saw!"

Stephen saw Minch lurking behind a bush many yards away.

"He's practising espionage," he said. "Don't look that way."

They elaborately avoided the brigand-like Minch, instead of calling him, as they might have done, and telling him to produce his considered objections. However, as the alteration was for next year, and as it was eventually made by the reluctant Minch, in accordance

with Mrs. Evandine's plan, there does not seem to have been much amiss in their conduct. They proceeded to walk about the garden, under the long, beautiful arches of rambler roses, now at their height, and to talk of other things.

iii

"You've been seeing a good deal of Skeffington lately, haven't you?" began Stephen. "He's a funny chap. He often comes in to see us in the evenings."

"It was rather amusing to hear him talking to Mr. Agg the other evening," went on Mrs. Evandine. "They dislike each other, and each other's work, intensely. I've never seen such opposites. But they get on very well indeed, because they try to outdo each other. However, I like Mr. Skeffington. He's a cheerful man. I think he likes you very much."

Stephen became rather uncomfortable because he did not like to feel so pleased.

"I was with him yesterday. This is the second lazy afternoon I've had this week."

"Not ill?"

"No. But instead of going up to town I've worked at home both mornings. I've been working on David's book. It's remarkable that I can get on ever so much better at home; but the cottage is so small that it means Irene going about on tip-toe. . . . So I don't do it often."

"You're not working too hard? I don't really think either of you looks well. I hope Hampstead agrees with you both." Mrs. Evandine spoke anxiously. "Are you both quite happy? I mean, no worries?" She was looking up at him with that clear truth-telling and truth-seeking expression which she had in common with Priscilla. Stephen looked back at her dubiously. How could he answer such a direct question, situated as he was?

"I've been worried about *The Norm*," he admitted,

disingenuously. "But that's over now. It's being kept on, at any rate for a time. You know we've got Roy staying with us? He's been rather a worry. Still, Priscilla's taken him in hand; and she's worked wonders already."

"And are these all your worries?" asked Mrs. Evandine. "They're not enough to make Priscilla so white."

"You think she's ill?" asked Stephen quickly.

"I'm rather shocked at her appearance."

What could Stephen do or say? How could he set the mother's heart at rest?

"We haven't been quarrelling," he assured her. "But we've been talking a lot. I think it'll be all right. But there *are* some other worries. Or rather . . . there have been. Some of them continue, worse luck!"

"Stephen, you alarm me, you know!" cried Mrs. Evandine. "I don't want to ask inconvenient questions; but I don't like to see you both looking . . . It's not possible, I suppose, that you're keeping something from Priscilla that she's found out in some other way—by accident?"

"No. She knows everything. We've got no secrets."

"And no disagreements?"

"Hardly any."

"Don't give in, Stephen. Never give in, if you're sure you're right." He laughed at her whimsical instruction, which he supposed to be intended ironically. "I mean that. Stephen—do you realize that Priscilla's rather a young girl?"

"Yes," he soberly said.

"And that you must treat her . . . rather carefully? Really, I mean, make demands on her." With a faint frown Stephen looked up. "Priscilla's rich in all sorts of ways. But I think—I always have thought—that you may spoil her by being afraid to call out these resources. She's unselfish, and she can understand and

do all sorts of things that you think a woman can't do and understand. And if you're afraid to make demands she may not know enough to rise to the occasion. If you trust her—and depend upon her—let her see that you *expect* her help at every turn, as a right, and not as a favour—you'll find that she'll respond. But you must be a man, Stephen; and treat her as though she not only had your love, but your reliance. . . . This is wisdom, I assure you."

Mrs. Evandine had grown so prettily serious during this long speech that she had looked exactly as if Priscilla herself were pleading to be put into harness. Stephen nodded his head.

"I hadn't worked on this plan," he said. "I doubt if I could have done so. But," and at this he a little shook his head, with self-reproach, "I'm quite sure I've made plenty of demands on Priscilla. And what's more, Priscilla is splendidly rising to the occasion." He was proud to say that, and his eye kindled.

iv

On the way home, when Priscilla and Stephen were walking to Whetstone, he noticed that she was very quiet, and wondered whether by any chance Mrs. Evandine had spoken to her in a similar sense. As they were walking in the early evening, when the overhanging trees made the pathway dark, he could not see Priscilla's face; but could only look past her at the road, now grey as a spider's web, and across at the darkness of the fencing opposite. Many many times in the past had he walked along this way, after parting with Priscilla; and he could not now see this lovely scene, mysterious in its dimness, without emotion. He did not love it for itself, as some of us do; he loved it because it was associated in his mind with those moments of his life when feeling had been strongest within him. The road belonged to times when

he could never have imagined Priscilla as his wife, times when he was sure she could never marry him, times again, more recent, when she had promised to do so. He had never walked this way since their marriage. Uncontrollably he was moved to walk nearer to her, and gently to take her arm.

"A little tired, are you?" he asked. Priscilla impulsively drew his arm closer instead of replying in words. So bound, they went onwards, Priscilla stepping out more boldly now that she had his support. Stephen also was in no mood for talking; but he was also anxious not to appear glum, so he rather forced himself to speak of the afternoon in what he conceived to be a cheerful spirit.

"Your father," he said, "seems to have solved his Southey difficulty—by deciding not to write that biography at all. He says it would need so much rereading of stuff he went over for the Crabb Robinson book. That period is so—what he calls 'fully documented'—that it means years of work unless he sticks to it constantly. He asked me to do it. . . ." Stephen paused a moment in case she might make any comment. "But I told him that as I wasn't specially interested in Southey I didn't think I'd make any attempt. He's always coquetted with that idea. His idea is that you can *make* yourself interested. I wish I could do that; but I can't. He seems to be able to take a man, read through his work and all the material about him, improvise a sort of enthusiasm for it, and write a charming book. . . ."

"I thought you thought his books were bad," said Priscilla quickly.

"Er . . . well, I suppose I do think they're wrong," he admitted. "In one way. I could understand if he didn't improvise his enthusiasm—if he set himself definitely to find out what he thinks of a man, and put that on record, once and for all. That I understand, because it's an intellectual experiment. What I can't understand

is, making oneself a partisan for the occasion, as he seems to be able to do—'making the best' of somebody. That doesn't seem to me to have any critical value. It's mere patronage. But all the same, I think his books *are* charming (however wrong), and I'm sure he'd write a very nice book about Southey, and say very apt things about the vast heap that Southey wrote. . . . However, he says he can't do it. I can't imagine him wading through all that stuff with any pleasure. . . ."

"Is it *worth* wading through?" asked Priscilla.

"I should think it was very interesting. I could read it with interest; but I couldn't praise it."

Priscilla laughed—a laugh that had sudden tears in it.

"Oh, you *are* funny!" she murmured. "There must be something inhuman about you!"

Stephen was taken aback. He had been carefully discriminating; and he had somehow made Priscilla laugh. It was very strange. The surprise did not irritate him; but then it did not please him. He remained impersonal. "Do you mean," Priscilla went on, "that father would read it all with a sort of something like boredom, and then extricate himself by some pleasant praise . . . and let poor Southey remain where he is now . . . nobody reading him?"

"Exactly," said Stephen, much pleased. "And he wouldn't even be quite perfectly accurate in his facts. He'd work in somebody else's opinion of something he hadn't been able to read through . . . so as to give it a gloss of . . ."

"What a dishonest man you must think him!" cried Priscilla. "D'you think he feels like that about Mr. Vanamure?"

Stephen laughed, as he had not laughed for several weeks.

"I'm sure of it!" he declared. "He admits he's bored

by him. He began to complain this evening, after Vanamure had gone. And then he gave a most delicate description of Vanamure—a portrait, d'you see?—and all the boredom was toned down into a charming . . . call it an 'appreciation' . . . with the boringness slurred over and the enthusiasm exalted. Not at all true: it bore as much relation to Vanamure as to me. If I were to die——"

"Stephen!" Priscilla's heart gave a jump.

"I'm very tough. I was going to say that he'd write about my bad temper in such a way as to show that I wasn't bad-tempered at all. He'd say that my writing was beautiful. And the cunning man would actually find somewhere a sentence or two that bore out what he said!"

Priscilla made no protest. She only thought to herself that some people had curious ideas about their own natures; and that outsiders perhaps after all did see more of the game. In a moment she spoke again:

"Did mother speak to you about me?"

"A little. She thought you looked ill. I had to be very nimble to escape her."

"Oh," Priscilla said, half to herself. "Did you . . . Stephen, did you by any chance mention Hilary to her?" Stephen reflected. He could not remember anything.

"I don't think so," he answered slowly. "Oh, you mean— Certainly not. I don't think his name came up at all. Why?"

Priscilla bent her head so that for a moment it touched his shoulder.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "Only she spoke to me about him. She said exactly what you said."

V

The long journey by tramcar to Golders Green, and

the walk from there in the beautiful summer evening, was made by these two in almost complete silence. But Stephen had led Priscilla along the Finchley Road so that they could reach the Heath by way of Hermitage Lane End and the West Heath Road. He was disappointed at the fact that the sky was too dark for a repetition of that thrill which he had felt after his long day's walk.

"I wanted you to see a beauty," he said in a low voice. "But though the lights look jolly now they're not as I saw them. It's too dark. That day . . . a dreadful day, dear. . . . The day after I'd told you about Minnie. When I told you, I *thought* I understood you; but it wasn't till I'd had that day by myself, and came back in the evening, that I really understood, and was really ashamed. . . ."

"Dear!" said Priscilla, wonderingly. Stephen sighed. She could not see that his eyes were bright.

"I was coming home—I came home *hoping* you'd be alone, and not cold; and came hurrying up here, and along home. . . . That was the first time I really felt personally jealous of Badoureau. He was at home, with David; and you were . . ." While he hesitated over a word, Priscilla supplied another.

"I was hateful," she said. "I remember. I still am hateful."

"No, dear, you weren't. It was just getting dusk, and the lamps were shining in the twilight. I wonder why it is that lights at twilight always seem so beautiful. . . . Oh, my dear, I *was* unhappy."

It is astonishing how much easier it is to speak of past unhappiness—of a past occasion, even though the same unhappiness remains—than of that which is present. Stephen could say this to her; but he could not have said, as he might with truth have done. "I am absolutely at your mercy; and if the next few days go wrong, and

you still are estranged after seeing Minnie, I shall be in despair, hopeless of any future."

vi

As they entered their gate Priscilla gave a choked little scream.

"Stephen!"

The dark figure which had turned from the unlighted window drew itself up.

"Pardon," said a voice. "I crave the lady's pardon." And with that the old man, with characteristic dignity, made a step to move past them. His tone changed. "To such straits I'm reduced, my dear daughter-in-law. The old man has to steal by night to try and see his lost boy, his baby." He stood before Priscilla. "Good night to you," he said, hurried to the gate, and walked swiftly down the road.

They went into the empty house, and Stephen turned on the light in the sitting-room. Priscilla followed him into the room, still wearing her hat.

"Stephen," she said. "I suppose it is right to take Roy away from him? . . . Oh, of course it must be right. But I do think he sounded rather pathetic."

"You think I'm hard on him?" Stephen asked. "Roy is probably at Slapperton Street now, trying to see the old man. I told him to go, because the old man really is frantically fond of him. But if he stays there—d'you see?"

Priscilla nodded.

"Oh!" she burst out. "It's horrible . . . the way one has to be deliberately cruel!"

"Well, I think careless cruelty's worse," answered Stephen, "because it's wanton. The old man kept Roy, and made a mess of it. That's all. You don't want to see Roy go under?"

"No. I'm not blaming you. I meant what a pity it was necessary. Why isn't Roy strong enough to look after himself?"

"Roy's a son of the old man."

"So are you. You're strong enough. . . . Strong . . . How implacable you are!"

"Dearest, I can assure you I haven't always been. Dorothy used to be quite as indignant about my softness. Quite as indignant. She used to ask me why I let the old man spoil all our lives. If I'd done as I ought to have done, and thrown him over as soon as my mother died, life would have been a different thing. People like the old man *can't* somehow be escaped without brutality. Really I've given him every chance. But since Roy was born he's been drinking all the time, and that rots the moral fibre. He's got no moral sense left!"

"Drinking!" said Priscilla. "Had he been drinking just now?"

"Always."

"Tell me, how did you stop him from always writing and coming . . . prowling?"

Stephen smiled very grimly.

"I told him that if he kept on blackmailing me he not only wouldn't get any more money, but wouldn't get his pound a week. That was quite enough. Also I told him that the only two people he had in his mind . . . the people whose opinion of me might be affected by anything he said, knew the real facts."

"Two people?" breathed Priscilla.

"Yourself and your father. I told him long before we were married."

Priscilla stood thoughtfully for a moment before she went to remove her hat.

CHAPTER XXVI: HILARY

i

FOR a long time Priscilla could not sleep for thinking of Stephen's last words; and in the morning they were still the subject of her anxious attention. So her father had known all along! He had seen in the knowledge nothing to affect his relation to Stephen; more, he had consented . . . he *must* have consented to Stephen's silence. From that it was an easy step to the idea—Suppose he had even suggested that silence? The moment she thought of that her mind seemed to give a great jerk. If the suggestion had been his, did not that make a great difference? It made almost as great a revolution in her mind as Stephen's original disclosure. For if her father knew, was it not possible that her mother also knew? Priscilla shivered at such a supposition. It made her seem extraordinarily lonely, until a flaming heat came upon her with indignation that she should have had so little voice in a matter that concerned her happiness. She was not a child! Oh, it was all so squalid—so solemn! Irritation succeeded to anger, and was again displaced by bewildered sadness. To think of all these kind people watching over her, and trying to make her life smooth in a bypath! Oh, she must end this way: it was a shameful road to travel! Restlessly she moved about during the morning, giving her attention to daily things as they arose, but anon recurring to the principal theme of her present discontents. Her resolutions gradually took form as she went about the house, and she was glad also to devote herself to particular pieces of work as emphasizing a new utility upon which she was determined to concentrate. She would be useful; she would be virtuous; she would in every way show these well-wishers that they

had underrated her strength. Gravely Priscilla nodded to herself, thinking how great that strength truly was.

ii

In the afternoon, which was again one of bright sunshine, she discarded her working dress for one better suited to the work she had in hand, put on her pretty blue hat, took her gloves and purse, and prepared with great deliberation to go out. She returned to the sitting-room to see that it was thoroughly in order, and paid a visit to the kitchen where Irene was occupied in harmless tasks.

"You'll be all right till I come back?" inquired Priscilla.

"Yes, ma'am." It had taken days of training to make Irene cease calling her "Mrs. Moore." It had been "Yes, Mrs. Moore," "No, Mrs. Moore," "Good night, Mrs. Moore," until Priscilla, in self-defence, had been forced to remonstrate. So the more decorous form of address had come into play.

And it was precisely at this moment—as Irene said "Yes, ma'am," in her most well-bred and least embryonic manner—that Hilary's knock came at the front door. Precisely at this moment, when Priscilla had her resolutions so firmly in hand that she could have carried them out at a single venture, that there came this interruption which checked and threw into confusion the plans she had formed. It did not need any violence of conjecture to know who stood there. It is impossible for any sensitive person to hear a knock without knowing at whose hands the knocker tells its significant story. And it was precisely her attitude to Hilary that seemed in that moment never to have been irretrievably fixed. Or was it truer to say that her determined attitude had been shattered and scattered in an instant? Slowly and painfully, while Irene darted to the front door with a haste

indicative of the receipt on a previous occasion of one private shilling, Priscilla stood by the kitchen table pulling off her thin gloves. She knew, and she was alarmed. While yet the visitor's step sounded in the hall, and while the clicking of the sitting-room door was striking her ear, Priscilla put her hands up to the blue hat, removed the pin, and continued to stand holding the hat listlessly in her fingers. Her eyes had for a moment closed; her cheeks had grown faintly more pink; her body had drooped. Words and thoughts and feelings belonging to her talks with Stephen and her mother recurred swiftly, as memory is supposed to flow in the dreadful seconds of extremest danger. Cowardice assailed Priscilla: she was oppressed with a knowledge of her youth and inexperience, like a little girl shamed before a visitor. This was the emergency for which she was unready.

Irene was back again, breathing hard, her globular eyes beaming, her whole plump and muscular person wriggling as it were with suppressed enthusiasm. To Irene the occasion was one of delight, not of conjecture. The handsome gentleman was in the parlour, making it seem ever so small by his fine upstanding gentlemanliness.

"Please'm, iss Missster Badoureau!" hissed the mushroom, as if she had been a snake. Priscilla paid no heed to the hissing. She was only wondering whether she had really enough self-control to behave towards him as though there had been no warning given. To Irene she gave no sign of nervousness.

"Very well, Irene. Then I shan't be going out. You can bring in the tea in twenty minutes. See, we've got everything? The china teapot—*do* put plenty of tea in the pot; and make quite sure the kettle's boiled. Boiled fiercely, remember! Not just sung. . . ."

Irene giggled at memory of a time when she had seen tea-leaves swimming about like cruisers in a pond of horrid pale tea. She promised her endeavours.

Then Priscilla, still holding her hat, which she hung in passing upon a peg in the passage, went bravely from the kitchen to the sitting-room, with a heavy heart and an air to which nervousness had given only a most bewitching vivacity.

iii

When she entered the sitting-room Hilary was standing with his back to the door, and was looking at a small caricature of Romeo which had been made by the many talented Skeffington. He turned at the sound of the opening door, and a smile of welcome lighted up his face.

"Hallo!" he said, taking Priscilla's hand with eagerness. "I say, I know I'm an awful nuisance; but I had to come in. How are you?" Smiling thus, he was superbly handsome. Every line of his body was full of health and beauty—the beauty of the athlete, with every muscle in splendid exercise. To Priscilla, as to Irene, he filled the room, making it appear inadequate. There was, seen thus, a gusto in his manner of addressing himself to life that gave him extraordinary charm. He was beautiful, winning, impetuous; and his yellow hair above his bronzed face served only by the contrast to give manliness to that face and determination to its expression. "Just looking at this sketch of Romeo. It's jolly good. Skeffington's a clever chap!"

When he paused, Hilary grew less handsome, his eyes less frank. With his praise was mingled some of his inner feeling, his general reservation concerning the object of his praise. Yet he praised warmly, generously. Priscilla felt her colour rising as she smiled again in response to his eagerness.

"Yes," she said. "He gave us that the other evening when we were there to dinner."

"How did you like it? I've heard about the apple

pudding. He's a great theorist about apple puddings. When I saw him last he gave me a lecture. . . ."

"I know!" laughed Priscilla. "He and Dorothy both say the same thing."

"See, it's anti-cloves, anti-lemon, anti-water: isn't it? Only apples."

"Fortunately that's the way I was taught!" agreed Priscilla. To herself she was saying, "I'm being horribly forced and unnatural; and my face is hot; and I'm shaking away. I really *must* . . ." Aloud she begged him to sit down. If only he were sitting down, she felt, it would be better. It was his marvellous largeness that made Hilary dominate the room; the air he carried of being magnificently supple. He sat down, his blue eyes unwinking, as blue and clear as glass.

"How did you like the cricket?" he went on. "Pretty boring, wasn't it? Your young friend seems to be cricket mad."

"Oh," Priscilla asked, while her heart thudded at the remembrance of Roy's indiscretion, "is that where he is to-day? You've seen him?"

Hilary also appeared to feel embarrassed at that question. "Yes," he admitted. "Well, I really went there to-day to see if you'd been encouraged to go again. It was so jolly the other day. . . ."

"Are . . . are they playing another team to-day?" asked Priscilla, at a loss for alternative words. He gave an account of what he had seen, describing the play for a moment.

"I was at Lord's this morning," he went on. "Nothing much doing there. The best places to see cricket are the country grounds—at Maidstone, or Horsham. There you get a pretty scene. It's social. Plenty of women go there, and there's a lot of enthusiasm. . . . How's David? I've not seen him since . . . See, only once since he got engaged."

"Yes; of course you've met Dorothy several times."

"Yes," said Hilary, without comment. Priscilla's eyebrows were a little raised. No enthusiasm here meant everything. It was clear that Dorothy and he were not friends. Swiftly she decided that that was only natural, since Dorothy had remarked to her that Hilary was conceited, and thought only of himself. Strange again. How quick were the Moores at summing up a character —particularly at disliking it. Was it abnormally quick and perceptive judgment, or was it prejudice due to misunderstanding?

"I should have thought you'd be going away," she ventured. "You're not generally in London during the summer, are you?"

"I can't get away." Hilary pierced her with his glance. "I say, are you all right? Not hot, or anything? The window *is* open." He looked quickly at the door. Irene's steps were heard in the passage as she traversed it on the way upstairs to the bedroom. "It's frightfully hot where I am. I think I shall try to get a place up in this neighbourhood. I've been getting very fond of Hampstead. . . ."

"You wouldn't like it," said Priscilla, with a decision born of her feeling of desperation. "It's terribly cold in the winter, they say. Everything freezes. Besides, I shouldn't have thought you could get what you wanted in Hampstead."

"How d'you know what I want?" asked Hilary in a curious voice.

Priscilla met his glance and read there sudden danger. With a vehement effort she answered steadily.

"I thought you were altogether comfortable."

"And you're not, eh?"

"Oh, yes," she quickly assured him. "We're quite comfortable."

"Priscilla . . ."

Clod, clod, clod came Irene's steps down the stairs. Priscilla breathed again. It was astounding to her that she should have become aware unquestioningly that the conversation was being forced into a fateful channel. Both of them were aware of it. Hilary's eyes seemed burned right back into his head, coldly, fixedly glowing. Priscilla's cheeks lost a little colour. She braced herself.

"That means that tea's imminent," she said calmly.

iv

Irene came, superlatively happy, clumping round the table with an energy that no warning had yet sufficed to tame. That energy which in rougher work was so admirable she brought to every task, and with extra obviousness into such an act as this. A held breath struggled to free itself in periodical bursts of panting; a tip-toeing dash after stealth made it appear that her feet were stubborn iron-shod pegs. In this desperate clamouring half-silence, like the coalman who has been warned that an invalid lurks within the house, Irene laid the table while Priscilla tried hard to keep the conversation within a normal range. Presently Irene, with one last stertorous survey of the table—beautifully set in spite of her apparent clumsiness—departed, dragging the door slowly and carefully to, only to slam it at the last instant.

"Bit of a drop from Biddy," said Hilary tactlessly, abusing the privilege of a familiar acquaintance. "Adenoids, I should think."

"She's a very good mushroom indeed," returned Priscilla, in steady protest. She was fully aware that his remark presumed her sense of a fall since her marriage in standards of comfort. "In a year or two Irene will be a very good maid."

"Then she'll leave you," promised Hilary, in a sudden

cynicism. "The thing will have to begin all over again. How you can stand it, Priscilla, I don't know."

Priscilla ignored a remark so impertinent.

"Have you still got your old housekeeper?" she inquired. It was useless.

"Priscilla . . . how long are you going to stand it?" Hilary pressed. "Can't you see for yourself? It's killing you. It's bound to kill you. You're not used——"

"Hilary: you're my guest, remember."

"I'm sorry. But this is something . . . I must speak of it. I can't bear to see you in this shanty!"

"Then you'd better not come to see me at all," Priscilla said, very quietly, but with a thrilling sense of crisis arrived. "It would be far better. Because I can't let you talk like that." She contrived to drink her tea, although her composure was so assailed.

"Upon my word, Priscilla!" cried Hilary, "you can't mean that! You know you've made a mistake." He spoke with assurance that was half contempt for her weakness in attempting such a pretence. "It's glaring!" He leant across the table as he spoke, trying to reach her hand, trying to make her meet his pressing, unmistakable glance of authority.

"Don't be a cad, Hilary!" She grew hot. "I don't think you understand what you're saying. It's intolerable!"

Hilary got up from the table. He was fierce with excitement. His words rushed out in a torrent.

"It's damnable!" he exclaimed. "The fellow's—Don't, for God's sake, say you're happy. You're not. I know you're not. I'm not blind. To see you . . . What d'you think I'm made of? You'll never stand it. Never—you couldn't! It's not your life at all. And that sour-faced rancorous prig——"

"Hilary! Be quiet. This is awful. I can't stand it. If you can't behave decently—and talk decently,

you must go." Priscilla also rose to her feet, her eyes dark with anger. "You're entirely mistaken. You've no——"

"Oh . . . But let me say . . ." He was coming closer, passionately. "I'm simply mad for you. Priscilla, dearest! If you were happy . . . No, I *must* say it! It's no good putting me off! If you were happy—didn't I go away? I ought never to have let him have you. But you're as miserable as you can be: it's heart-breaking! Look!"

He impetuously caught her arm and drew her to the small oak-framed mirror which hung in the room. Priscilla saw her face reflected in it, white and drawn, her eyes dark as night. She drew away, shivering convulsively, excited and rendered frantic by his terrible air of mastership.

"I don't want to hear any more of this," she said steadily. "Listen, Hilary, once and for all! I love Stephen with all my heart. All my heart, do you hear? As he loves me!"

And with that she lost her nerve and began to cry.

V

For an instant Hilary stood as one enchanted, spell-bound by the machinations of an evil force.

"You tell me that?" he said in a low voice. "You tell me that? Yes, but why have you let me go on? You . . . Oh, you're lying! You're lying!"

She moved away again, across the room; but he followed. He caught her hand, her shoulder. With a rough motion he took her violently in his arms. Impossible to struggle while those strong arms held her so tightly. They were like steel ropes that bound her to him. Priscilla felt hopeless, hopeless. Desperately and unavailingly she put forth her too insignificant energy.

"Hilary! Hilary!" she cried chokingly, while he continued to kiss her with savage power. "You *must* let me go!"

Her agony made her struggles more vigorous, at last of more avail. He could not continue to hold her against such desperately effective protest. As she wrenched one arm free she forced his head back and away from her face.

"Priscilla!" he exclaimed in a fierce whisper.

Terrified, afraid to call out, but with every fear stabbing her heart, Priscilla looked wildly round the room. Her eye fell upon the window. Against the pane was a white face, and two eyes met her own for that frightful instant. She screamed shrilly with horror. Hilary too had seen the face. It sobered him. He released her and they both stood panting. They heard the kitchen door open, and Priscilla went quickly to the door of the sitting-room.

"It's all right, Irene," she said in as steady a voice as she could command. Then she turned, and to Hilary said: "Now go. Go. Never . . . never . . ." She could say no more.

How she remained upright until he went she never knew; but the moment the front door banged her strength seemed to evaporate, and Priscilla slid sobbing and half fainting to the ground.

CHAPTER XXVII: PRISCILLA'S JOURNEY

i

WEARILY Priscilla rose: mechanically she put her hands to her hair and to her eyes. The self-disgust she felt was mingled with horror at recollection of that peering and malignant face. It was as if a dream sufficiently unpleasant had drifted without warning into nightmare. Still half sobbing she went across the room, leaning upon the mantelpiece and looking down into the empty grate, blind to everything, conscious only of a passionate loathing which made her almost hysterical. So she remained, with long quivers of horror shaking her body, immersed in her sense of shame, until thought began once more to play its part. It seemed to steady her for a moment. She acted upon an imperious impulse —from whatever it sprang—of self-protection in forcing herself to be calm until an emergency was past; and, after a hesitation, she rang for Irene to clear away the tea-things.

That done, Priscilla went, her composure turned to stupor, up the short flight of stairs to her bedroom. Oblivious of everything, with wave upon wave of reaction breaking down her powers of nervous resistance, she flung herself sobbing quietly upon the bed. Had she permitted it, had she begun to sob aloud, she would have lost self-control and abandoned herself to passionate weeping. With desperate will she maintained that self-control, suffering the more, but preserving her pride. Only at times, when her mind went creeping back to particular feelings, there came upon her a frantic surge of excitement that could only have found vent in an hysterical scream had she not opposed an equally fierce repressive impulse. With her little sobs growing less

and less, and her stupor increasing, Priscilla lay upon the bed in a state between sleeping and waking. An hour passed. Two hours . . .

It was not until the clock below chimed six times that Priscilla started up, at first leaning heavily and languidly upon her elbow, stupidly feeling that she could not bear to go downstairs again. But she was unable to stay. Roy and Stephen would be home. . . . They must not know that she was ill, or the cause of her distress. Slowly she rose, sitting on the bed for another few moments of exhausted lethargy. Then, with a sense of fatal delay, she feverishly staggered to her feet, smoothed her gown, bathed her face, and dressed her hair before slipping down once more to the kitchen.

ii

As soon as Stephen came in he saw that she was ill, and sent her to bed. Although he speculated about the cause he made no comment or inquiry. Only he insisted that she should rest; and later found her asleep, her face almost as white as the pillow-slip upon which her head lay.

So night passed and morning came.

In the morning Priscilla rose. She could not bear, although she was still unrefreshed to stay in bed; and she went down to breakfast as usual. Irene was there, cutting some bread and making tea, with one or two small pots on the gas-stove, as if an army were being fed. Stephen was for a moment writing; Roy in the garden picking a rose; Romeo watching him, stretched under a shady bush with his light fawn underparts shining. They all assembled at breakfast, and as the postman's knock sounded Priscilla blanched. There were three letters—two for Stephen, and one for herself. It needed no glance to see from whom her letter came. It was from Hilary. She could not bear to read it now.

Later she would read it. Meanwhile, she must watch Stephen's face. . . .

"One's from Dorothy," he said, after grinning at both; "and the other's from a man who doesn't like my articles in *The Norm* and thinks I ought to know it."

It was Roy who laughed. Stephen knew very well that Priscilla had not opened her letter.

iii

The letter, which she opened when she was alone, was a hasty apology. Hilary was, so he said, ashamed to have allowed his feelings to mislead him: he was going North in the morning and would not trouble again. But he gave her the address to which he was going.

"I suppose," said Priscilla, half aloud, "in case I want to write to him. . . ."

She went out into their garden, where there were many old flowers left by earlier tenants, such as tall hollyhocks and beautiful straggling rose-bushes, with brighter flowers bordering the narrow path. There were vegetables also, behind a small discreet little hedge. It was under this hedge that Romeo had taken up his position since breakfast; and he now lay there in enviable peace, stretched at full length, with every muscle relaxed, ideally happy except when a bird or a butterfly hovered temptingly near. For Romeo was not asleep: he was basking, keenly alive to all that passed. When the bird approached Romeo's muscles would tighten, his tail fiercely twitch . . . when it flew away Romeo hid his chagrin in a yawn, and lay back once more. He was enjoying each fleeting fraction of time, living in sensation; and when Priscilla came and stooped over him he lazily rolled upon his back and looked at her comically over the top of his head. His softness, his delicate colouring, his extreme beauty of movement, all made Romeo an unusual little cat; but he was unsurpassed also for a sense of the ridiculousness

of any situation. So Priscilla, strangely comforted by his air of *savoir-vivre,* tickled Romeo, and felt very much better. As far as Hilary was concerned, she felt a thankfulness that it was all over, settled, she felt, once and for all time. He would not come back. But for the rest? Only to Romeo, and such as he, did life present itself as a continuous panorama of pleasant things.

iv

An hour later Priscilla resumed the hat and the gloves which she had been forced so fatally to discard upon the previous day. And, walking very quickly, she went down the little road towards the "town" of Hampstead. In her hand, in the small bag which she carried, was the piece of paper given her by Stephen the other evening. She was going to see Minnie Bayley.

What she was to say, what either of them was to say, she could not imagine. Trepidation grew as the journey proceeded. Of what use was her visit to be? What was its object? Priscilla had no answer. She was going because Stephen had wished her to do so. There were still few things for which that was not a sufficient reason. She had no image of Minnie. Minnie was simply there across her mental horizon like a little dark impalpable cloud. Somewhere, in a secret corner, was an unwritten dossier containing inexorably every least detail of Minnie's action gleaned from Stephen, or from Dorothy, or from Roy's casual mention. Often enough, Priscilla had examined this incriminating record; at first dismissing Minnie for life in the brief word "horrid"; but later dwelling more upon interpretations, until she had come to a highly subtilized version of Minnie's character and lost all certainty about it. Only the ignorant are positive; and when one sees even a wise person definitely assert-

ive it is best to assume that he is either an expert or, for this occasion only, unsure of his facts. That is why most theological discussion meets dogma with dogma and ends in dust. And Priscilla started as the theologian here, which will explain why she was even now puzzled rather than tolerant. If she had once seen Minnie, or if she had seen her photograph, or her dress, or heard her voice, she would have known exactly what her opinion was. But there was only report; and report so confusing that it seemed to have no consistency.

But as Priscilla reached King's Cross, and Pentonville; when she reached "The Angel" and saw the forking roads, and heard the rumbling of incessant traffic, she was chilled with a dismayed feeling of adventure beyond her powers. It was like a forlorn hope, in which none but the sturdy should engage. She was bereft of the support which she would have had in her own home; but bereft of it of her own deliberate will at the moment of engaging to perform this task. And she was here because she loved Stephen—because Minnie also loved Stephen. That was her watchword. Although she shrank, she did not gainsay. She went on, reluctantly, down the City Road, miserably wondering about the people who lived in these ugly houses, wondering if they were happy, wondering how they could be happy, not yet arrived at the complacency with which the well-to-do suppose all poverty to be as natural as it is inevitable in a capitalist society. Everywhere she saw ugliness, solemn ugliness; and in the side streets she saw that particular kind of hopeless shabbiness which we describe as squalor. In the heart of this Minnie lived; and it was here that Priscilla found her.

V

Minnie was not machining. Her room was silent.

She sat by the window sewing, sometimes looking up from her work and out at a patch of sunlight. She had been whistling to herself, because she thought of going out for a little while later in the day; and she was surprised to hear the timid knock at her door. When Priscilla entered, Minnie rose at once, standing in the window. She knew instantly who was there, and stood like a person stunned by some loud noise or by the sense of immediate and inescapable danger, looking directly at Priscilla, with the light falling upon her face, which was very pale. What Priscilla saw was a woman several years older than herself, very thin, with a great deal of soft brown hair. Her eyes were soft, her rather full, mobile lips, when they were parted, disclosed beautifully perfect teeth. Minnie was not ungraceful; her blue overall gave her a fresh and attractive air. She looked startled and excessively nervous. What Minnie saw was a slighter figure than her own, dressed in a plain dress of a cream colour, and a hat of cornflower blue; a girl obviously still immature, her eyes very blue and clear, her complexion and hair very fair, her manner wholly simple, like that of a child. It was as a child that Priscilla struck Minnie, in spite of her gravity and noticeable breeding. They looked at each other in silence for an instant. Then:

"I know who you are," said Minnie. "You're Mrs. Moore." She moved quickly and cleared her second chair. "Will you sit down?" She did not offer to shake hands. Priscilla sat down, her hands in her lap. She felt breathless, disarmed by Minnie's self-control and the almost protective kindness of her manner.

" . . . Stephen told you I would come," she began.

"I didn't really believe him. It's kind of you." Minnie spoke awkwardly. As she spoke Priscilla saw that her hands moved, that her lips trembled and as it were overpronounced the words. But there was no indication of resentment or of fear. Priscilla knew that both their

hearts were beating fast: all feeling dropped away, and in her heart there moved a quick pity for Minnie. Minnie was at the same time feeling a pity for Priscilla. They were strangers; they did not understand one another; they were sorry for each other and full of kind feeling. Having spoken once, they both became afraid, and sat tongue-tied.

It was again Minnie who began to speak.

"I always wanted to see you," she said. "Dorothy told me about you. I didn't think I ever should."

"No," Priscilla acknowledged. Then, impulsively, she continued: "I wish you hadn't to live here."

"I'm not going to. Had to come somewhere, and I know this neighbourhood. You always come back to what you know. You can't help it. Like going home to die."

They both looked at each other again. At each pause they looked directly at each other; and it seemed as though it brought them to a standstill. Priscilla was deeply aware of the four oppressive walls of the room, with their cheap, ugly wall-paper, and the grey ceiling. She could see upon the mantelpiece a box, and beside it a photograph. That, and a table and the two chairs upon which they were sitting, with a low bed in the corner half hidden by a screen, was the only furnishing in the room. Dominating all was the sewing-machine, and pieces of light-coloured material lay heaped upon the table, so that the room seemed to be all dark where it was not littered with sewing and with pieces of cotton ready cut out for machining. "What nasty coloured stuff," Priscilla was thinking. Her eyes strayed.

"I expect you hate me, don't you? . . . Spoiling your happiness, and all," said Minnie suddenly. Priscilla grew hot. The attack was unexpected.

"Hate you?" she answered. "No, no. I don't think I ever did that. You see, I didn't know what you were

like. I might have hated you then, I think. But I never did. Oh, no. . . ."

Minnie gave a curious small laugh.

"You know what I'm like now," she said.

"Well, and I came to see whether I couldn't help you." Priscilla spoke earnestly: that had been her object, and the talk had hitherto suggested that something quite different had been in her mind. "That's quite true. It was the only idea—Stephen's and mine."

"Bless you for it!" cried Minnie, in a great tender voice that was hardly her own, but the voice of some strong consciousness within her. "I don't wonder he loves you. No, I don't wonder. Not now. Though I did when I saw him. You know, I feel so much older, wickeder than you. I'm not wicked, though: you needn't think it. You *don't* think it, I'm sure."

"No, I don't," said Priscilla warmly.

"What did you think I was going to do—when you came? Cry?"

"I was wondering what I could say to you."

"What did you decide?"

"I didn't decide anything. But I don't see what I can do. Is there anything at all?"

Minnie considered: her eyes were full of tears. She could not speak for a little while, and even then her voice had a slight quiver in it, as though it would have been a relief to cry aloud.

"I'm a fool," she began. "I never meant to cry. I've got into the way of it. You do get into the way of it if you're alone. If you're not very cheerful." Her voice was a very pleasant voice, though she did not speak very well. It was not loud, nor was it very sweet; but it did not grate upon the ear, and its cadences, although not refined, were pretty. Priscilla's heart softened towards her. Both were full of this incommunicable pity. It was as though to each of them had for this moment been

revealed the other's sorrowful heart. Minnie wiped her eyes. "He's the only one who's ever been kind to me," she went on soberly. "I thought he loved me. I was . . . well, I suppose I wanted him to love me so much I made myself believe he did. I don't think *he* ever *thought* it—not for more than five minutes anyway. Not that it matters now what he thought. I say, you're not treating him badly—you know, because of me? You didn't ought to do that."

"You said," Priscilla murmured, very low, "you said you felt older than me. I've been feeling very young. I wish I could tell you. I don't know what's happening to me. I love him just as much; but it's not the same. It's not all the same—as though he and I were different people. Do you understand? Wouldn't you feel as I do?" She was speaking very earnestly, really opening her heart, in spite of all.

"I suppose I don't expect as much as you do," said Minnie, rather dryly. "I *know* a bit more. But I'd let Stephen do anything he liked, so long as he came back to me. Stephen, I would—not any other man . . . now. That is, I mean . . . I mean, you're his wife."

Priscilla sighed and averted her eyes with the impulse of hiding her disagreement. She could not agree to such self-abnegation. It was of no use to talk in this way about one's feelings, which were beyond control. She looked away, and then back again. Minnie was observing her; but this time perceptibly with less pity, less sympathy.

"Oh, you think I don't love him!" cried Priscilla, fiercely answering the unspoken message.

Minnie did not answer for a moment. When she spoke the words came very slowly, almost with an air of irony.

"I don't know. Yes, I do, though. Only you love yourself a bit, don't you?" she asked.

vi

It wounded Priscilla to the quick. She flushed deeply and painfully, and the tears started to her eyes.

"I beg your pardon," Minnie said quickly. "That's not what I mean."

"No. Very likely it's true. I'm afraid it's true." Priscilla shook her head gravely.

"Now you've seen me do you feel the same . . . what you said?"

Priscilla hesitated. The effect of the simple inquiry was very great. It was powerful relief, because it made her think, and it averted their disagreement. She looked up, and smiled cordially, in a way that always made Hilary Badoureau draw a quick breath of desire.

"I'm very glad I've seen you," she said deliberately. "It's done me a lot of good. It's made me feel differently altogether. I should like to see you again . . . I should like to. You say you see Dorothy? . . ."

"I wish I was you, I wish I was you!" startlingly cried Minnie, and came over to her side. Her eyes were shining and her lips were parted, so that in spite of her pallor—perhaps because of it—she looked really beautiful. Priscilla half rose, and their hands met and clasped. "I envy you—ever so much. You can do such a lot, for everybody. You can make him happy—if you want to. And you can make me happy, by being kind to me. All sorts of things you can do."

"I will, I will!" exclaimed Priscilla, deeply moved by the appeal.

"But be kind to him," Minnie urged. "It doesn't matter about me. I'm nothing. I'm only a miserable woman who's got nothing to live for. But Stephen's different. He's a man in a million. And if . . . When I saw him he looked so ill. Worried, he was. You ought to look after him. That's what we're for, you

know—women—though it takes us a long time to learn. Just think of me—the mistakes I've made. Awful things. I never ought to have married my husband. I've stayed with him seven years, and now I can't stand it any longer, because he's such a boozer. But I've stayed with him till I knew it was no good. And when I think of you and Stephen I think to myself how lucky you are to have him. That's why I envy you. You've got him all the time, and the way he loves you—if he loved me a quarter of that I should be half dead with joy. It's easy work being Stephen's wife—for you. It wouldn't be easy for me. I couldn't do it. I'm not good enough, and I'm not a lady. But for you—it's the chance of a lifetime!"

She was half laughing and half crying as she spoke, still holding Priscilla tightly by the hand and emphasizing her words by means of urgent jerks. But when Priscilla looked a little up and into Minnie's face she saw that every part of the speech was meant in earnest, and that Minnie was speaking right out of her heart, from her passionate love for Stephen. Moved beyond words Priscilla quickly put her face up and kissed Minnie's cheek.

CHAPTER XXVIII: THE OLD MAN

i

WHEN Stephen left the cottage that morning with Roy he expected that they would both go to the British Museum. There he purposed introducing Roy to the marvels of the Egyptian section and leaving him to find his way about the building for a couple of hours, while Stephen himself went into the Reading-room and made up for the days of semi-holiday which he had spent at home. He did not expect that the day was instead to be one of the most remarkable in his life, nor that it would see the end of his chief troubles. He thought of it as a day much like other days, crowded with work, lightened with sunshine, but still oppressed by the feeling of uncertainty which had grown to be his settled habit. Therefore he was astonished at what happened.

He and Roy were walking down the pretty road in which stood the cottage, when they met a rather roughly dressed man, who was hurrying up towards them from the direction of Mount Vernon. The man was looking anxiously at the houses upon his right, with a rather perplexed expression; and as he came abreast of the two Moores he wavered, half inclined to speak to them. Something apparently decided him to do so, for he stopped, his heel grinding in the gravel.

"Excuse me," he said in a rather Cockney voice. "Do you know anybody living here of the name of Moore?"

"That's our name," answered Stephen.

"Wasn't sure of the number," said the man. "They say he diddin know it 'imself. Asked 'im, but he diddin know it. Just your name, like, and where it was. . . ."

Stephen was mystified at the man's words, and looked at him questioningly. The man was a very brown man who might have been a gardener or a coachman, and his speech was thick and difficult to follow.

"Who is it you're speaking about?" asked Stephen. "Who sent you?"

"Mr. Vuggage of The Towers. . . . Last night he was comin' down Heath Street in the car, drivin' 'imself, and this old gentleman ran into it. Fair old smash-up, sir. Old gentleman was very badly hurt, and they diddin know where 'e belonged till this morning. He's only just come round a bit, and they asked him where he lived, and he couldn't remember. . . ." As the man was speaking he had turned and they were unquestioningly going with him, so that this explanation was jerkingly given as they walked. "Mr. Vuggage picked him up and took him along to the 'ouse. And there he is. It was almost outside, sir; not far away. Mr. Vuggage is a doctor, sir. He's been lookin' after him himself. Streets are so dark at night, and that's a nasty tricky corner. Well, I'm very glad I found you so quick. . . ."

"He's been unconscious?" Stephen questioned.

"So they say, sir. They said to me I was to tell you he's only just come to."

"Badly hurt?"

"I believe so. . . . Say he's all bandaged."

They spoke no more until they arrived at the doctor's house, and were ushered into a room. The man left them, and they had nothing to do but to stare at the handsome mantelpiece of black marble, and the gravely ticking clock above it, and the mahogany sideboard with its adornments of silver bowls and cut glass. It was a very typically comfortable room, and an old carroty cat of immense size lay upon the shaggy hearthrug of animal's fur. In the window stood a bureau; and a big dining-table occupied the middle of the room. It was a

very dull place, so that they only had this impression of its solidity and the ticking of the clock. Uneasily they waited, until the clock began in a silver tone to chime ten.

ii

A moment later the door opened and Mr. Vuggage came in, looking very grave, and giving each of them a keen glance from his very shrewd eyes.

"Good morning, Mr. Moore," he said. "Good morning. Your father's had a rather nasty accident. . . . I'm afraid I'm partly responsible, because I was driving my own car at the time. Your father was knocked down and badly cut about. He was stunned. I brought him in here as it was so near, and I thought I might be able to do something for him. Now I'm afraid I can't do anything. . . ."

"You mean, he's too badly hurt?" Stephen asked.

"Yes. He's been unconscious for several hours; but he's conscious now. He asked for you. I take it you are Mr. Stephen Moore? I doubt if he'll last many hours. Of course he can't be moved. It's out of the question. I don't think I can do anything for him. Wish I could. In any case I question if he'd have lasted much longer." He looked piercingly at Stephen.

"I thought he seemed very much aged when I last saw him," Stephen said.

"How old is he—sixty, sixty-two?"

"About that."

"He's been killing himself. You know?"

"Yes."

Mr. Vuggage nodded again as Stephen made the admission.

"Well, you know where I am," he said in a resolute tone. "I reported the accident, at once; and an inspector has all the particulars. I've done whatever I could

medically, and I've sent for you. If I may say so, without seeming to shirk responsibility for my share in the accident, I should imagine that he was . . . that he stumbled in crossing the road, and fell violently in front of the car. It was going at a fair speed, of course; but in the ordinary way a man might have avoided a serious accident. Of course I had the brakes on. I stopped at once. Perhaps you would like to see your father? Come this way, please. Excuse me. . . ."

iii

In a room on the same floor, overlooking the garden, a bed had been fitted up, and upon it, heavily bandaged, as the messenger had indicated, lay the old man, groaning heavily. They heard him groaning before they reached the room—in deep, hoarse groans—and when they were beside him they could hear that he was ejaculating as well as groaning. He was speaking Roy's name and Stephen's. Over and over again he said the names, sometimes adding a word or a phrase—such as "Ah, my boy . . . Stephen," or "My baby Roy . . ."—which showed how his mind was running on familiar thoughts, brokenly turning them and repeating them in disturbed soliloquy. His hands, which lay uninjured on top of the coverlet, were never still. The fingers were clenched and twisted constantly, so that the knotted veins showed on the back of the hands. Stephen had not realized before that his father's hands were those of an old man, the veins discoloured and the skin yellow as old ivory. And the old man continued to repeat his name. He had not yet seen them, for he could not move his head at all. His eyes seemed to be fixed upon the ceiling, so dim in this darkened room. They could see his lips moving.

Stephen went forward, and together he and Roy stood beside the bed, so that they were at last seen and recog-

nized. The old man ceased his ejaculations, and for a moment continued to groan, closing his eyes when he did so. Then he opened them again, looking up into the faces of those above him.

"Who's there?" he demanded in a breathless voice.

"Roy and Stephen."

"Stephen," said the old man. "Roy. You've come!" He seemed to have so little strength, and so little power of speaking, that his eyes closed in exhaustion.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Stephen asked very distinctly. "Anything at all?"

The old man took no notice of the inquiry. His eyes remained closed; he groaned again. Stephen saw lying before him the dumb and helpless shell of his father, a man whose life was far spent—not the strong and unscrupulous man whom he had always feared and despised. His father had so changed, this recumbent figure was so different from the rather sinister figure which he had carried in his mind's eye, that he could not have recalled his enmity. Only he felt intensely curious, observant of every detail. He saw Roy impressed by the scene, bending farther than himself over the bed, his face white with the shock, his whole carriage betokening sensibility. He saw the doctor standing opposite, a little impatient. A nurse sat at a small table a little distance from the bed. The room was rather dark; there was a cooling and pungent smell of medical dressing in the atmosphere. Slowly Stephen's mind concentrated upon the helpless figure under his eye, upon those twisting fingers, upon that pale face and bandaged head. He did not think about what his father had been, nor about his mother, nor about any part of their life in Islington. He thought only of this wreck, watching in silence the moving lips, hearing almost unmoved the groans that proceeded from them. He it was who saw that the old man was looking up at him through his eyelashes.

"You know we're here, don't you?" Stephen said—half as an interrogation, although his tone was not that of a question. The old man did not answer. He remained still for a longer time.

"I'm dying," he said suddenly. It sent a shock through both his boys.

"No, daddy!" cried Roy, in a low voice, urgently. "No!"

A faint smile curved the old man's lips.

"D'you hear that, Stephen?" he gasped. "After all you've done!"

"Oh, hush!" whispered Stephen. "If you're . . ." He was appalled at the retention of vindictiveness even here, when his own mind was so free from hatred. Then he became ashamed of his protest.

"After all you've done!" repeated the old man. "My Roy! my little boy . . ."

Roy took one of the moving hands and held it.

"I'm here, father," he said.

"Not so hard, my boy," whispered the old man. "Eh, he loves me, this boy!" His eyes turned and he looked at the doctor. "This one," he went breathlessly on. "Not the other one. Not the other one." For a moment or two he lay still. Then his free hand moved impatiently, and his lips moved without sound.

"He wants you to let go his hand," the doctor whispered to Roy, who drew back and away from the bed.

"The mighty Stephen," muttered the old man. His lips parted, and showed his gums. How old he looked! "Well, my boy, I 've had a happy life." He breathed heavily again. "It's over now. It doesn't matter, now it's over. But I like . . . to see your face . . . up there, Stephen. It reminds me." He groaned; his eyes closed. "I wanted . . . wanted to see you. If I could sit up. . . ."

"No!" they told him. He lay for several minutes with

his eyes closed, and the doctor exchanged a glance with Stephen. Yet the old man did not seem to be dying: his mind was clear, his speech, although indistinct, was still intelligible.

"Stephen," said the smiling lips. "I wanted to . . . Bend down, Stephen." Stephen put his head lower—so low that he could not see the old man's eyes, but could only watch his mouth. There was another pause. Then the old man seemed to give a chuckle which was checked by another fierce groan. Stephen felt his father's breath upon his cheek. "An irony, Stephen," went on the old man in a faint voice. "An irony. The impeccable Stephen . . . you understand . . . a letter . . . poor Bayley. The impeccable . . . the incorruptible . . . Paid back . . . in his own coin . . ." Still the old man's eyes peered at Stephen through their long lashes, mercilessly. "Own coin," gasped the old man. "His own wife . . . another man's arms. . . . Do you understand what I mean?" Then in a dreadful whisper he hissed one word into Stephen's ear. "Cuckold!" he said.

iv

Stephen started up for a moment. Then he spoke deliberately in reply.

"If you're dying," he said in a low voice, "you might be better employed. There's nothing you want us to do?" He was trembling, but he would not let the old man see that he was trembling. He had too much pride to let the old man see that he had been hurt.

"Only to go," said the old man clearly. "I don't want you!" He groaned again, and seemed to struggle a little. "I've always hated you, Stephen. . . ." And with that he fell into silence again, and became oblivious of them. His lips only now uttered the ejaculations they had heard upon their first entry, punctuated by the low

groans which he could not have restrained even if he had attempted to do so.

The doctor looked at Stephen.

"I must be here," he said. "There's no sense in your staying. Except for . . . Unless you wish to do so. You'll get no more from him. You'd better go home. If there's a change I'll send up for you. He may last twenty-four hours. I'll let you know."

He led the way to the door, and they both followed him. Even Roy made no attempt to stay. They left the doctor at his front door, and turned away up the hill again to the cottage.

"What was that he said to you?" asked Roy in a dazed voice. "I didn't hear."

"Oh, nothing," Stephen returned. "Nothing you'd appreciate."

Roy sighed, and asked no more.

Two hours later, a few minutes before Priscilla returned from seeing Minnie Bayley, Stephen received a message to say that the old man was dead.

CHAPTER XXIX: THE LAST

i

ROY was at home when Priscilla arrived; but Stephen had hurried down to the house of Mr. Vuggage on receipt of the doctor's message. It was thus from Roy that Priscilla heard the account of all that had happened during the morning. It took her breath away. Her first thought was a wild hope. "Oh, if he's said nothing!" She was terrified of the old man. To tell Stephen of her struggle with Hilary, of its ending, of that white face at the window—that was one thing. To combat by explanation a tale told by hostile lips was another. It was enough to force a faint sound of fear from her. If she could only be sure! If there was to be a painful explanation, then she trusted that Stephen might have learned nothing that would prejudice him against her. Of what use was innocence before calumny? She could see it all: she could see the old man's malignant delight at sowing mistrust. Now at last she recognized Stephen's hatred of his father, his desire to prevent the old man's mischief-making talent from enjoying its due triumph. The understanding made her nerves quiver. Did Stephen's love stand true? Did he still believe in her? Or was his jealousy, already aroused, to lay him open to believe a charge against her? She was innocent. Was that sufficient shield?

Priscilla knew that for Stephen the old man's death spelt freedom from an intolerable bondage. But for herself might it not mean the loss of Stephen's love?

If the old man had spoken! He could say he had seen her in Hilary's arms. It was true. If Stephen asked her only—as she had asked him whether he was afraid of Hilary—whether the facts were so, she could not deny. She could only explain. Explain! How explain? She could imagine Stephen saying: "Yes, but is it true?" She had no defence. She was guilty thus far. She had been thoughtless, had truly welcomed Hilary, had not discouraged his visits. That was criminal, as she now saw. She had done in innocence, or in ignorance, that which she now saw in the glaring light of retrospect. And yet Stephen might refuse to believe his father. He might cling to his trust in her. The old man might not have spoken, as he certainly had not written. That was her hope. If she might only narrate the event to Stephen all would be well. He would understand. But if not—would he then understand? In ordinary times, he would certainly be displeased; he might blame her. But now? Had he that generosity, that confidence in her?

It came to Priscilla that she was asking to be understood, to be trusted, as Stephen had asked to be understood and to be trusted. The very difference between their cases made the similarity strike her the more nearly. Stephen had not asked forgiveness: to him the honest narration of a fault had seemed in itself the best claim upon her charity. And to Priscilla now the desire that she might not be put in the wrong was paramount. In each case the old man was the danger, the one from whom came the vital threat! It was impossible that she should fail to feel afraid. She had only once before been in the wrong in her relations with Stephen. Only once! Had she not been in the wrong more recently? *He* did not think so, except in so far as she had tried to force herself to show no difference in her behaviour. Could she herself remain equally content? It was not only Stephen's feeling that mattered. Her own was fully as important.

At that moment, in the middle of her fear, Priscilla despised herself.

ii

In this state of agitation she awaited Stephen's return. She longed for it and she dreaded it. She was so excited that she had no impulse to think what she would say to him. But that she would explain to him that day she was determined. Insensibly she had been very much influenced by her talk with Minnie. She did not for a single moment accept Minnie's attitude of all-forgiveness. It was not a question, it never had been a question, of forgiveness. Stephen had not asked to be forgiven. It was a mere technical term used by men who deceived their wives. All Stephen had asked was that she should remember the circumstances of his fault; that she should understand his reason—his admittedly selfish reason—for keeping silent during their engagement; that she should recognize his motive for concealing the nature of the old man's threat upon their honeymoon. She had seen Minnie, and she thought she could make great allowances with sympathy; she was almost eager to believe that her own father had foreseen the effect upon her of disclosure and advised its postponement—though that she could not, and would never, forgive; and she was already sure that Stephen's one desire upon their honeymoon had been her happiness. She did not palliate; she tried to see clearly and to admit candidly that her lover had been unwillingly in fault. Therefore, for her own part, having been through a fire of pain, she had learned that her love for Stephen was stronger than her pride. She could not feel the same: she nevertheless loved him above all men and believed once more wholly and without shame in his love and his honesty.

What would Stephen think of her? It gave Priscilla great distress to think of herself as helpless to plead her

innocence in face of any malign accusation from the old man. That he had stolen to the window in the hope of seeing Roy she did not doubt. It was clear to her, after the encounter at night in their front garden, that he would do such a thing. He really loved Roy—he craved for the sight of him, as mothers are said to do if they are separated from their children. Could she not understand even the old man? In her present excitement that was beyond her. She was too much afraid of what he might before his death have said of her. How she longed for Stephen's return!

iii

At last he came, and Priscilla vainly scanned his unreadable face. She saw him sitting at the table, very grave and sturdy, with his dark hair crisping above his ears, and the little wrinkles about his mouth and eyes cut deep with years of endurance. But he did not frown. His face was serious at all times; he laughed too seldom; even his smile was so rare that it lighted his face with a great boyish and unlooked-for charm. On this day he was more than usually grave; but he looked at her always with a kindness that had no reproof, and, better still, no accusation behind it. They ate their very simple lunch to the accompaniment of spasmodic talk in which Roy more freely joined. From him Priscilla heard further details than those which he had already supplied. From Stephen there came only the information that he had telephoned to David in order that David, if he saw fit, might break the news to Dorothy. That was Stephen's only fresh contribution, and it represented an action of which she approved.

"What shall I do this afternoon?" asked Roy of Stephen. "Makes you feel rotten to think of . . ." He hesitated, unable to finish his speech.

"What were you going to do?" Stephen questioned. "You can't do anything more about him. I shall have to go down to Islington, and you can come with me if you like; but I shan't go until after tea."

"I was going to cricket," murmured Roy, fiddling with a crumb.

"Then I should still go." Stephen glanced at Priscilla. "Unless you *feel* badly."

"Oh . . ." said Roy ingenuously. "Oh, no, I don't. . . . Not very bad." And he left them a few minutes after lunch, since wherever he went he would be thinking of the cricket and not of the old man.

When Stephen was alone with Priscilla he began to smoke, quietly puffing for some time at his solid little pipe. And Priscilla sat opposite to him in the other armchair, on tenterhooks lest his first words should be those of accusation. She felt that her cheeks were hot, and her heart heavy as lead. Yet his first words were not as she had feared: they were, on the contrary, upon quite another topic.

"I sent David my first chapter the night before last," he puffed; "and when I spoke to him over the telephone just now he thought I was ringing up about that. He says he's delighted."

"Splendid!" said Priscilla quickly.

Stephen went on puffing slowly, and she watched in a state of fascination the thin bursts of grey smoke from his mouth and the climbing blue curls from the bowl of his pipe. Her heart had become less heavy, but she was conscious of its rapid beating. Her breath came quickly.

"I was glad," Stephen added. "I suppose he'd say if he didn't really like it. . . ."

"Stephen!" began Priscilla, in an unsteady voice. "I went to see Minnie this morning."

There was a little shock in the atmosphere, and she knew from the slight movement of his pipe that Stephen's

teeth had clenched more tightly than before upon its black and solid stem.

iv

But just at that moment their talk was interrupted by an extraordinary incident. There came, from Romeo's covered basket near the fireplace, three piercing squeaks. Eee-wee-weew! said a strange voice, like the voice of a mouse.

"Whatever's that?" exclaimed Priscilla, blanching.

"Funny!" Stephen rose and went to the basket. Together they knelt and folded back the soft cover, and were transfixed with astonishment. Within, purring loudly, with his paws opening and shutting in ecstasy, lay Romeo. But along with him, with long horrid little black paws spread out and paddling, was a tiny creature of the same species as Romeo! Horror seized both the onlookers.

"Oh, Romie!" cried Priscilla in consternation. "How *could* you!"

"A single kitten!" Stephen said. "Is that possible? I suppose so; but how amazing! Did you expect it?" He turned, almost accusingly, to Priscilla.

"Never! Romeo, I'm ashamed of you!" Priscilla's eyes had filled with tears. Romeo, with all the beaming pride of the little mother-cat, stretched himself more comfortably, his eyes shining and inviting their praise. He did not realize his *faux pas*. He did not understand that he had fallen from grace by being a normal little cat. To him this event was a matter of pure joy.

Priscilla turned back to Stephen. He took her hand as both of them knelt by the cradle of this solitary son of Romeo.

"This is because he was left!" she said dismally. "He must have been demoralized."

Stephen comforted her.

"Many people," he said, "would like to own Romeo's kitten. Don't worry, dear. It's only one. Romeo," he went on, addressing the complacent mother, "she's really very delighted with you. She's proud of you. And so am I."

Romeo smiled upon them inscrutably, and moving his head looked irresistibly at them over the top of it. The kitten remained busily silent.

V

It all came more easily then. Priscilla, who had been really moved by all the side-thoughts provoked by Romeo's *accouchement,* was able to speak clearly, without trembling. It gave her confidence to feel from Stephen's manner that she had everything to tell, nothing to answer. She described her talk with Minnie, and dwelt at length upon her feeling, her half-formed plan for helping Minnie, her determination to regard Minnie as one to whom kindness was due. Stephen listened in most attentive silence, merely nodding at times; and when she had finished he smiled in appreciation. But without waiting for him to express approval, Priscilla hurried on.

"And Stephen," she said, "yesterday afternoon Hilary came. . . ."

Again he slightly stiffened and she saw his eyes take a deeper colour of regard, as though he were giving her a kind of attention more urgent even than she had had before.

"So he came," Stephen slowly prompted.

She told him of the scene with Hilary. She told him of the exact happenings, from their beginning to that end of horror when she had seen the old man's white face pressed against the window. Stephen continued to sit opposite to her, and she was aware that he continued

to smoke, his face remaining to all appearances wholly impassive, whatever his feelings might be.

"I was afraid," faltered Priscilla. "I was afraid . . . that he might have written to you. But he didn't . . . because . . . And then I was afraid he might have—just for malice, though it was wrong of me to think that—he might have . . . It was hateful of me to think such a thing. . . ."

"You thought the old man might have tried to make me think . . . tried to make mischief between you and me?" inquired Stephen in a grave voice.

Priscilla nodded. Stephen sat in silence looking at her, as though he were thinking deeply of what she had said.

"I was very afraid," she said. "I wanted to tell you how everything happened. I was afraid you might . . ." She faltered. "Might have been, in some way, set against me. . . ."

"Could you believe that?" he asked, very gently. "My dearest . . ."

Priscilla looked up: their eyes met. Both rose, and their hands were joined; she was in his arms.

"You believe me?" Priscilla said. "I love you altogether." Her eyes were bright now with the grave boldness of a girl truly in love.

"Are you happy again?" he begged.

"Always."

"Whatever happens?"

Priscilla allowed him to kiss her, and made no reply but to offer her lips.

To have recovered that old happiness, that content in him, that feeling that they had no longer any secrets, was for Priscilla to return to her old allegiance. To Priscilla nothing that might come would disturb the profound serenity of her love. Suffering might come—anxiety, and the dread of loss—but with restored confidence between them she could face with unflinching

pride whatever sorrow the world might send. That her resolute heart should have its pain we who live in the present may well believe; but that Priscilla endured unchanged, that at least we shall do her the justice to imagine.

THE END

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